

MERCENARIES

Putting the World to Rights with Hired Guns



Al J Venter

Contributing producer and director of the
Discovery Channel series "Mercenaries"

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To those of my friends and associates who have spent time in action as "Hired Guns", fighting rebel insurgency and often mindless brutality in Africa, the Middle East, Asia as well as South and Central America. Their efforts to save lives and bring a measure of order to chaos have rarely been acknowledged, and then only grudgingly. A few – brave men all – didn't make it through.

AND

To my friend and comrade-in-arms Yves Debay, killed by a sniper in Aleppo, Syria on January 17, 2013. Like me, Yves was born in Africa, in Elizabethville in the Congo in 1954. We spent time together in several conflicts that included Rhodesia, the South African Border War and when the civil war in Beirut was at its worst, in Lebanon. Rest in peace my young friend.

Published in the United States of America and Great Britain in 2014 by
CASEMATE PUBLISHERS
908 Darby Road, Havertown, PA 19083
and
10 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EW

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ISBN 978-1-61200-244-6
Digital edition: ISBN 978-1-61200-245-3

Cataloging-in-publication data is available from the Library of Congress and the British Library.

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Cover Images: Courtesy of Cobus Claassens

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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“Sometimes in Africa a heavy machine-gun can be as effective as ten tanks elsewhere…”

Lt-Col Tim Spicer, former chief executive of Sandline and
author of *Unorthodox Soldier*

“If we want to put the world to rights and we’re not prepared to risk our own forces in doing so, then we should consider the employment of private security forces… If the South African mercenaries had been allowed to stay in Sierra Leone from ‘96 onwards, a lot of children would still have their hands today.”

William Shawcross, author of *Deliver Us From Evil* on
ABC TV August 29, 2000

“If there is a lesson to be learnt from merc work it’s this – you are on your own. If you put your trust in others or possibly rely on outside forces for salvation, you’re buying yourself a one-way ticket to the oblivion of a merc’s limbo: a jail if you’re lucky, and if you’re not, a bullet in the back of your neck in some godforsaken backwater…”

Soldier of Fortune magazine: June 1987

“Military companies are not a passing phenomenon. Military force can stabilize a crisis, challenging the view that negotiation in the absence of coercion is sufficient to reach a settlement… states and international organizations need to rethink current perceptions of the private military sector as an unpleasant aberration.”

David Shearer in his introduction to
Private Armies and Military Intervention

“By definition, mercenaries have always been a dying breed.”

British journalist Ian Bruce in *Comment*,
London, February 19, 2002

Acknowledgments

This book would never have appeared in print had it not been for Dan Korn, Senior Vice President of Discovery Channel (Europe) roping me in at extremely short notice to produce and direct several episodes of a new TV series, appropriately titled Mercenaries. I was already in South Africa at the time and things seemed to have gone a little haywire with some of the earlier episodes when I got the call. What to do but accept with gratitude… I have a career of film-making behind me (100+ TV documentaries) and what a pleasure it was to "saddle-up" again.

That done, I had to persuade David Farnsworth, who, with his lovely wife Sarah, runs Casemate Publishers in the United States and Britain, that there was a place on the international market for a new book on the subject. And since there is nobody else alive who has spent so much time with these "Guns for hire" over several decades, he acceded to my request.

Steve Smith, Casemate's chief "copy taster" was quickly brought into the mix and though time has been short, they gave the production to Durban's Bruce Gonneau, another old pal of mine who handles many of my print titles. From start to finish, the entire project took a little more than two months. Here I also had the help of editor and proof-reader Jerry Buirski, one of the best talents in the business. Clinically deaf, Jerry has read more books than any other person I have ever met.

To finally achieve this objective, I was obliged to call on Nicol Stassen, owner of Protea Books in South Africa for permission to use a couple of pieces that had appeared in some of my books that he'd originally published.

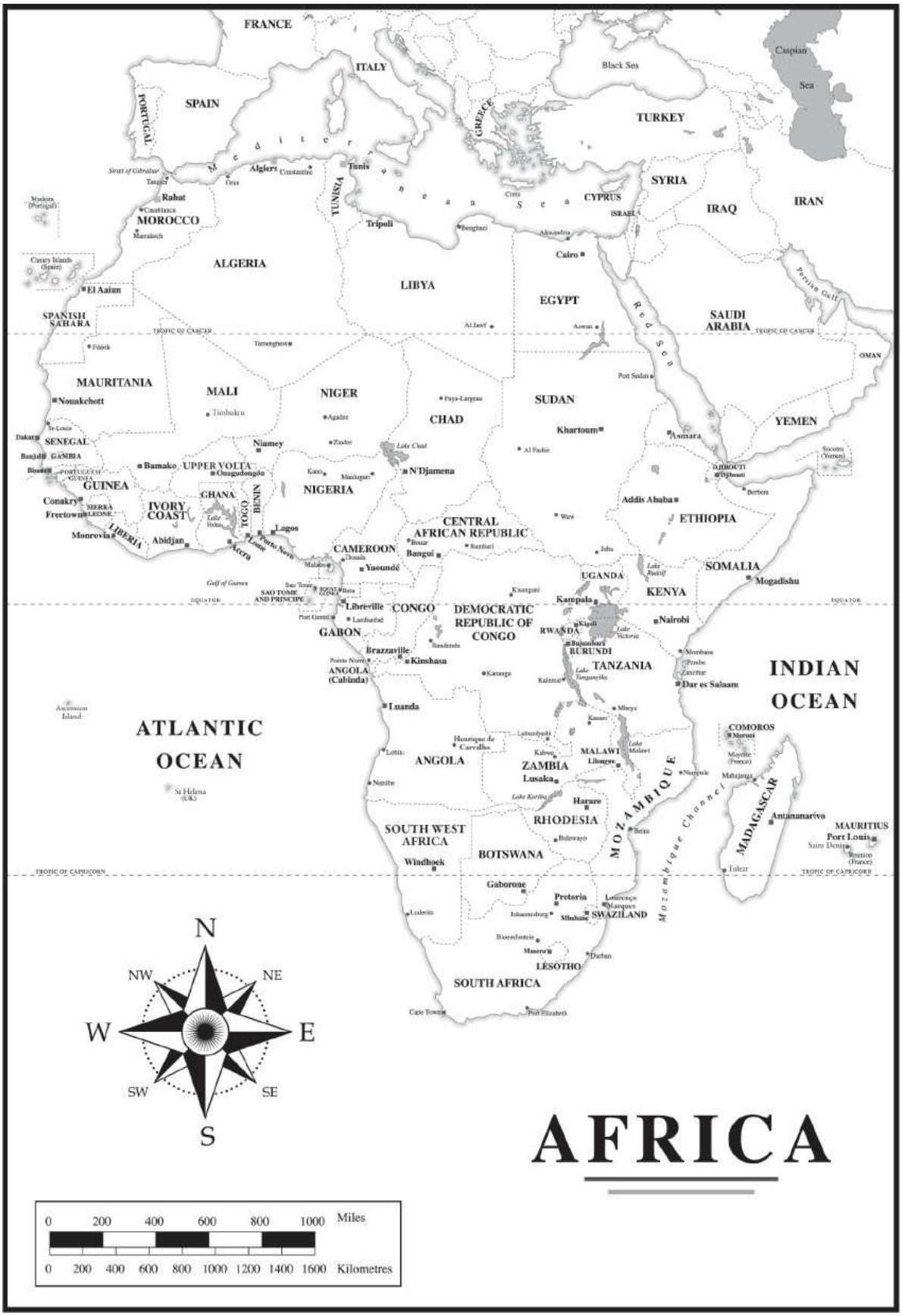
There is a bottom line, and that is the incredible cooperation I got from so many of my old merc "oppos", some with whom I have seen combat. These include Roelf van Heerden, Manuel Ferreira, Cobus Claassens, Dave McGrady, Neall Ellis, Arthur Walker, "Monster" Wilkins, Hennie Blaauw, Fiona Capstick, Dave Atkinson, Peter Duffy and quite a few others.

There are several who are no longer with us and they include Fred Marafono, Duncan Rykaard, Bob Poos and Yves Debay. That tally might have included "Nellis", who survived a serious suicide bombing attempt in

Somalia last December where he'd been flying gunships in anti-piracy roles. His Level 6 armoured car took the brunt of the explosion and he walked away relatively unscathed. Those that survived were hospitalized.

Last, a tribute to my long-suffering darling Caroline who has learned to tolerate my moods and "under-pressure" antics. Thank you, sweetheart.

And we can never forget or repay the hospitality that we both received from the Troskie family in Pretoria. Theirs was a home-from-home for us on so many occasions. I thank you Manie, Elize and the boys Bernard and Gerhard. And Ouma Janet and Oupa Basil too…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AFRICA

CHAPTER ONE

PRIVATIZING WAR

Al J. Venter originally wrote this report, headed "Privatizing War", for Britain's Jane's Information Group. At the time he was Africa and Middle East correspondent for *Jane's International Defense Review* and special correspondent for *Jane's Intelligence Review, Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor as well as Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst.* For a long time the article appeared on the website of Sandline International, founded by former British Army officer Lieutenant Colonel Tim Spicer.

For more than three weeks in early 1999, a lone Mi-17 gunship – flown by a South African helicopter pilot, Neall Ellis – was all that stood between a depleted Nigerian ECOMOG force and the collapse of the Sierra Leone Government. Anarchy was a whisker way.

Alone at the controls for 12 hours a day without a break – except to refuel and gun up again – he struck at rebel units in and around the capital. During the course of it, Ellis took heavy retaliatory fire and, as he later told Jane's Intelligence Review [1]*, "while the rebels had a lot of RPGs and SAMs, I suppose I had my share of luck."*

The Washington Post's former West African correspondent James Rupert tells of an interesting insight to that period in a report from Freetown, Sierra Leone [2].

When Sierra Leone's lone Mi-24 combat helicopter blew an engine late last year, he wrote, it meant disaster for the government. The ageing Soviet-built gunship had been the government's most effective weapon against a rebel army that was marching on the capital.

Officials scrambled to repair the machine. But rather than rely on

conventional arms dealers, they took bids from mining companies, gem brokers and mercenaries, most of whom held – or wanted – access to Sierra Leone's diamond fields. The government finally decided to buy $3.8 million-worth of engine, parts and ammunition through a firm set up by Zeev Morgenstern, a senior executive with the Belgium-based Rex Diamond Mining Corporation.

In the end, the parts proved unsuitable and the helicopter stayed on the ground. The rebels seized Freetown, killing thousands of residents and maiming many more, Rupert said. Since then the Freetown government hired a bunch of Ethiopian technicians to work on the "antiquated" Hind and that was what Ellis flew.



The Royal Air Force sent four of its Chinook helicopters to help in the war against the rebels in Sierra

Leone. Neall Ellis had been fighting a rear guard action for almost a year by then but he had gained much experience in the enemy's abilities and tactics. All this was put to use by the British after they arrived. (Photo: Author's collection)

This privatization of conflict has included the use of fuel-air bombs in an African war. The Angolan Air Force dropped them on UNITA positions around the strongholds of Bailundo and Andulo in the country's Central Highlands shortly before Savimbi was forced back into the bush, in late 1999.

Luanda's newly acquired Sukhoi Su-27s were unleashed in the attacks and the bombs used were a legacy of an earlier period when mercenaries fought for the government. Interestingly, deployment of fuel-air bombs in an African insurgency or civil war is a concept that has been around a while. Referred to as "the poor man's atom bomb", its use was first mooted when the South African Army was engaged in a succession of border wars in the early 1980s.

Swapo's elaborate tunnel and trench-line systems in south Angola – a legacy of Vietcong involvement with the Marxist Luanda government – had become a feature of insurgent countermeasures, if only to avoid taking casualties from South African aircraft. These bombs were considered a means of driving the guerrillas into the open.

The South African mercenary group Executive Outcomes (EO) first used fuel-air bombs in Angola in 1994 against UNITA infantry and mechanized concentrations north of Luanda and that option was again explored after this South African group went into Sierra Leone. This writer was present when plans to bomb Foday Sankoh's rebel headquarters near the Liberian border – using fuel-air bombs – were discussed. By then a lot of research had gone into the issue, including the fact that it would have been an ideal weapon to use in the close hillside confines where the rebels had bolstered their defenses. EO pulled out of Freetown before these plans could be implemented.

Judging from the extent of the destruction of some areas around Savimbi's headquarters near Bailundu, reports indicated that fuel-air bombs might have been used in Angola's war. Civilian eyewitness accounts detailed the size and shapes of canisters dropped, as well as the behavior of the explosives. Some said that from a distance it resembled napalm, something that they had seen often enough in the past.

Fuel-air bombs, while not illegal under the Geneva Convention, are regarded by international bodies as transgressing human rights. A former EO source told the Johannesburg *Mail & Guardian* that a cache of South

African-made fuel-air bombs had been left behind in Angola in 1994 after Savimbi signed the Lusaka peace accord.

It is a gradual process, but a consequence of the spate of brush-fire conflicts throughout much of the Third World is that war is being privatized. There is good reason: Western governments are reluctant to put their boys at risk for obscure causes that might be otherwise be difficult to explain to their electorates.

Two important events underscore this development. The first, early in November 1999, was a repeat of the original Executive Outcomes operation. MPRI, a large private American military planning group with close ties to the Clinton administration, was dispatched to Angola to train the Angolan Army of President Eduardo dos Santos. According to the *Mail & Guardian*, Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI) reached an accord with Luanda to take the Angolan Army (FAA) in hand, very much as EO had done in the past.

Shortly afterwards, another private South African force became part of the UN contingent sent to Dili in East Timor, not long after that tiny former Portuguese colony had achieved independence. Consisting mainly of people of mixed blood ("Colored", in South African racial parlance) it was intended that its men blend in with East Timor locals. The force was assembled and trained by two Durban-based security companies (Empower Loss Control Services and KZN Security). Their job – under the aegis of the UN – was to work in an undercover capacity in the territory.



American mercenaries are always a feature of foreign wars, whether serving in the French Foreign Legion or as “freelancers” in the Rhodesian conflict. Dana Drenkowski flew 200 combat missions with the USAF in Vietnam (left) and then went to Rhodesia, this time accompanied by another veteran, shirtless Jim Bolen. (Photo: Dana Drenkowski)

Jose “Xanana” Gusmao, leader of the National Council of the East Timorese Resistance, told South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki at the time that he did not trust any of the bodyguards that the Indonesians might have provided, which is why he asked for the South Africans who would also double in that role.

With Executive Outcomes having subdued several rebel uprisings in Angola and Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s, African states have been the first to observe a proliferation of private armies.

So, too in South America and certain parts of Asia. South African helicopter gunship pilots flew as mercenaries in Sri Lanka, not long before a “force-for-hire” employed by the British company Sandline International was to have been deployed in Papua New Guinea. Australian regional politics (and PNG handouts) got in the way of that little exercise.



American mercenary Dave McGrady seen here during a bounty hunting operation with the author in Rhodesia's north-west. He saw a lot of action in Africa and later, with the mainly Christian, Israeli-recruited South Lebanese Army in the Middle East. (Photo: Author)

The track record is interesting. The first time a South African mercenary

force went into Sierra Leone in 1996, it took them less than three weeks to "sanitize" a region around the capital half the size of Connecticut. A week later, a small, mainly-black force comprising 85 men – led by two surplus Russian-built BMP-2 IFVs and with a couple of Mi-17s for top cover – drove Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels out of the Kono diamond fields, 120 miles into the interior.

That operation took three days and crippled the rebels: diamonds were to have funded their revolt.

At no stage did the South Africans ever have more than a couple of hundred men in Sierra Leone (it was usually only 80 or 100), supplied twice monthly from Johannesburg by Executive Outcomes' own Boeing 727.

The war in Sierra Leone only tells part of the story, because by the 1990s there were mercenary involvements in a spate of civil wars, revolts, coups and uprisings in Africa, the Middle East, South and Central America and elsewhere. By early 1999, news agencies reported former Soviet Union pilots supporting the Angolan rebel group UNITA, though their role was more transport than combat-related.

By May 2000 there were also Russian and Ukrainian pilots flying MiG fighters on both sides of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. Indeed, *US News and World Report* carried details and a photo of Colonel Vyacheslav Myzin emerging from the cockpit of one of Ethiopia's newly acquired Su-27s after a demonstration flight [3]. He was labeled one of Africa's "new mercenaries." Similarly, in the Congo (both before and after Kabila ousted Mobutu), Serbs, South Africans, Croats, Zimbabweans, Germans, French and other nationalities were involved, fighting both for and against the government.

Then came Angola, with former Executive Outcomes personnel – almost all exclusively Southern Africans – involved on both sides of a civil war that had been going on intermittently since 1975 (not counting the 13-year anti-colonial guerrilla war against the Portuguese, prior to that). Significantly, some of these soldiers trained and fought alongside Angolan government forces in the mid-1990s [4].



South African mercenaries attached to Executive Outcomes took the lead against the rebels in Sierra Leone early on in this horrific struggle. Their numbers rarely exceeded 150 and they took less than a year to force the opposition to the negotiating table. There were 16,000 United Nations troops in the country at the same time and they achieved absolutely nothing. British forces under then Brigadier David Richards eventually took over and within months had crushed the rebels. (Photo: Roelf van Heerden)

With EO's demise in January 1999, following South African Government pressure to disband and an Act of Parliament in Cape Town making any kind of mercenary activity illegal, a number of old hands surreptitiously switched sides and for some time directed Savimbi's efforts against the government. In the end, Luanda's dominance in the air prevailed and UNITA was forced to the conference table, finally ending that civil war. Dr Jonas Savimbi was lured to attend a meeting with "friends" and murdered.

Other mercenaries (again, of African extraction) are said to have been seen in action with rebel contingents in Guiné-Bissau. In Senegal's Cassamance Province, early reports speak of foreign veterans (possibly French) helping dissident rebels.

In the Sudan, Iraqi pilots flew some of its planes in operations against southern largely Christian Nilotic dissidents, almost exclusively black, with other reports speaking of chemical weapons being used against them. The

Khartoum government also salted its ground forces with Afghan *mujahedeen*, Yemenis and other foreign nationals against a Christian/animist uprising in the south.

Mercenaries were also active in uprisings in Burundi, the Congo (Brazzaville), Rwanda, Uganda and in what was once termed the Northern Frontier District of Kenya where most of the insurgents are Somali, some backed by warlords, others acting on a freelance basis. As we have learned from numerous news reports, that struggle, now involving an al-Qaeda offshoot that calls itself al-Shabab, goes on.

There have been more reports of mercenary activity in the Comores Archipelago where French national Bob Denard originally overthrew an established government, following a seaborne invasion in 1978. After arresting President Ali Soilih (he was later shot), Denard – backed by his mostly French and Belgian clique that had the blessing of French Intelligence – ended up ruling the country as his private fief. Denard was finally ousted by a French naval task force, 11 years later [5].

Elsewhere, there were Russian, French, Chechnyan and other mercenaries active during the war in Kosovo (and earlier, in Georgia, Chechnya itself, as well as in Dagestan at the end of the millennium). Hired fighters were also identified in conflicts in Afghanistan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and elsewhere.

Similarly, members of Columbia's drug cartels (as well as those fighting the drug lords) employed South African and British mercenaries for combat and training of both pro and anti-government militias.

Then a Pakistani-trained mercenary force was accused of massacring 23 Kashmiri Pandits in India. A government spokesman said in New Delhi that this action – the third of its kind in 15 months – was a direct bid to topple locally elected government officials. Hostilities in Kashmir escalated markedly as a consequence [6].

So too in Sri Lanka while that war raged. South African pilots were at the controls of helicopter gunships that were used against the Tamil Tigers, though that didn't last because the government made no secret that they regarded these "hired guns" as expendable.

Before that, during the Lebanese civil war, mercenaries – allied to one cause or another – were used both for training and as combatants by a variety of the 100-plus factions involved in that country's horrific 16-year debacle.

Some, hired by the South Lebanese Army (SLA) commander, Major Sa'ad Haddad, were American and it mattered little that Jerusalem funded Haddad or that the SLA was the brainchild of an Israeli journalist and military reservist, Colonel Yoram Hamisrachi: the purpose, throughout, was to bolster numbers.

According to American mercenary Dave McGrady who was hired by the SLA, the pay, food and accommodation was derisory. The result was that foreign fighters didn't stay very long. He reckoned he was earning a nominal salary of perhaps $200 a month and the conditions under which he and others lived were primitive.

Not long afterwards, the staunchly Christian Lebanese Force Command (LFC) started to use American volunteers for tactical and sniper training in and around Beirut. Some of these people were sent to Lebanon at the behest of Colonel Robert K. Brown, publisher of *Soldier of Fortune*. Others, mainly French and German radicals, attached themselves to a variety of Muslim forces that opposed them.

It was about then that the Falangists hired a former Rhodesian Air Force Canberra pilot. He was paid $10,000 a month but never flew a sortie, which was possibly just as well since the entire airspace north of Beirut was securely dominated by Syrian SAM batteries [7].

For all this, and perhaps justifiably, there is a powerful ground swell of opinion against using hired guns to fight wars and kill people.

The abhorrence felt towards employing freelancers to do military work is almost universal. Also, it goes against a fundamental ethos of traditional professional armies, which is why Australia reacted as strongly as it did when Sandline accepted a contract to fight against Bougainville's revolutionaries.

As David Shearer said in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* (Fall edition, 1998), for three centuries the accepted international norm had been that only nation-states were permitted to fight wars. The rise of private companies entering the business as a legitimate, profit-orientated activity, he observed, had provoked outrage and prompted calls for them to be outlawed.



Durban's Peter Duffy fought long and hard for Mike Hoare's 5 Commando in the Congo (and was later recruited by Hoare for the aborted Seychelles invasion. He is seen here, centre left in camouflage with a group of his unit's irregulars near Lake Tanganyika. (Photo: Peter Duffy)

He went on to say that the popular press "…used labels like 'dogs of war' conjuring up images of freebooting and rampaging Rambos overthrowing weak – usually African – governments."

Yet, in recent times, there has been a shift in the nature of war. Martin van Creveld, one of the preeminent war theoreticians of our time, postulated as much in his book, *The Transformation of War*. It is his view that the sort of conventional wars waged by nation-states are fading from the map. In future, he suggests, "war-making entities" are likely to resemble those of the pre-modern era. These might include smaller, regional conflicts in which one tribal element is pitted against another, religious associations, and commercial entities like those that opened Europe's trading routes to the Far East. Both the Dutch and British East India companies had their own armies and all of their members were mercenaries.

Van Creveld had a vision of his own for the future: "As used to be the case until at least 1648, military and economic functions will be reunited… much of the day-to-day burden of defending society against the threat of low-intensity conflict will be transferred to the booming security business… and,

indeed, the time may come when the organizations which comprise that business, will, like the *condottieri* of old, take over the state."

There is good reason why the developed world is reluctant to get involved in fierce, distant, often ethnic -related brush fire conflicts, which, like those in Somalia, the Congo and Rwanda, tend to lead nowhere.


TION
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Top: the Somali coast is littered with the wrecks of aircraft that have either been abandoned after landing along desolate stretches of beach or “impounded’ by rebel groups: this was taken by the author while he flew with a US Army helicopter unit during “Operation Just Hope”. Bottom: Somali soldiers attached to a militia group in breakaway Somali Puntland get ready for action. (Photo: Arthur Walker)



Two fine views of Mogadishu – taken from a US Army Blackhawk chopper from seawards (Top), contrasted (Bottom) with the southern approaches to Mogadishu Airport. In the foreground of the lower photo can be seen the remains of dozens of scrapped military aircraft, many of them inoperable because there was simply nobody around to make minor repairs or fit spare parts. (Photos: Authors' – taken while with US Forces in Somalia)



Dead Somali pirate killed during stand-off operations in which two dozen hostages that had been held captive on the freighter *Iceberg 1* by these brigands for three years, were freed after a 10-day operation that involved South African mercenaries fighting with the Puntland Maritime Police Force. (Photo: Arthur Walker)

When the United Nations, under the auspices of *Operation Just Hope*, went into Somalia in 1991, it was motivated firstly by the suffering of a million civilians who were starving and secondly, to try and stop the fighting. Well-intentioned, it was also hoped to bring a measure of order within a socio-military system gone berserk.

But it didn't take long to discover that nobody had factored in the ability of a handful of bloody-minded Somali warlords to offer such stiff resistance. An important consequence of that little debacle is that it will take another generation before the brutal TV images of bodies of US soldiers being

dragged naked through Mogadishu streets are erased from the minds of the American public.

Certainly, as Rwanda and Afghanistan also proved, it will be a while before American troops are again committed to some real or imagined cause, whether this be in Asia or Africa.

The end of the Cold War has also shifted priorities. Backing one tin pot dictator against another is no longer an option. In any event, it doesn't make sense. Even more difficult is trying to rationalize their motives because avarice is usually at the root of it.

There is also the reluctance in Western countries to intervene in other peoples' wars because nobody will accept even a limited number of casualties without very good reason. This is one of the reasons why ground forces were never committed in Kosovo. Others call it the "body bag syndrome."

It makes sense as a consequence to look to an alternative, and this perhaps one of the reasons why the mercenary has made a significant comeback. Sam Roggeveen, a lecturer in strategic studies at the School of Australian and International Studies, argues in his thesis, *The Case for the Mercenary Army*, that "war today is less a matter of applying massive force across a wide front as it is of applying intelligent force at carefully selected points."

Thus, he declares, all things being equal, an efficient, adequately equipped and well-motivated force should always achieve a good advantage in any Third World struggle.

Even the debacle that is Somalia today – weighted by its own set of mindless imponderables – could easily have been averted. At the core of that debacle was a top-heavy, hideously bureaucratic United Nations where nobody had made any real attempt at leveling the playing fields by matching force with force as the intervention operation had done in East Timor. For one, the Australians never had to ask anybody whether they could fire back.

In Somalia, then, as in South Lebanon, even today, with UNIFIL, there are ridiculous prerequisites for taking any kind of military action. And even with the presence of a large body of African Union troops – successful at first, but now wavering – al-Shabab continues to predicate violence on its own terms. For a year, after these Islamic lunatics were driven out of Mogadishu and the southern port of Kismayo, there were few car bomb or IED attacks. As we go to press, such attacks have again become commonplace, and with them, the

casualties.

A mercenary force, in contrast, carries hardly any of this kind of baggage. At the same time, the “freelance military alternative” does present its own set of difficulties. Some are of perception; others are of recent history. It is also true that the image of the contemporary mercenary, *per se*, is hardly flattering, due, in part, to endless stories of indiscriminate killings in which mercenaries in the Congo of the 1960s were involved. Those war dogs of an earlier era left behind a muddled trail of violence and bad memories when finally they left for home.

The problem stemmed, in part, from a former British Army captain referred to by his contemporaries as “Mad” Mike Hoare because he was so unconventional (and successful) in achieving results. It was Hoare who was tasked to raise a freelance commando to fight in Moise Tshombe’s Katanga.

Afterwards there were reports of indiscriminate killings on the part of some white mercenaries, reinforced every so often by gory photos of groups of smiling European troops holding aloft the heads of black men, almost like trophies. That specific sequence appeared in many of the news magazines of the time.

There were also illegal American, Canadian and other “volunteers” in Rhodesia’s war, as well as some who went on to serve with South Africa’s crack 44 Parachute Brigade in Angola. While military discipline in both countries was strict and any transgressions dealt with by the full force of military law, racial connotations of whsite men fighting blacks galled the liberal world. In the political climate of the day it hardly mattered that in both countries, the preponderance of those who were actually doing the day-to-day fighting were black. And their enemies – the insurgents – were also black and African.



South African mercenary commander Duncan Rykaart with senior members of the Angolan Armed Forces while Executive Outcomes was still active in that West African state. Duncan later died in a mysterious air crash that involved a Russian plane en route to Somalia and that went down shortly after lifting off from Uganda's Entebbe Airport. (Photo: Author)

The classic case against any future mercenary role is still the role of a notorious Cypriot mercenary in Angola who called himself Colonel Callan. His real name was Costas Georgiou and he did serve in the British Army, at first with distinction, in 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland where he was credited as being one of the best marksmen in his unit. He was also alleged to have fired 26 shots on Bloody Sunday when civilians were killed in Derry. By all accounts he never did better than make corporal, though even that is disputed by some who maintain he never went beyond private soldier.

Hired by the Central Intelligence Agency in a hopeless last-ditch stand by the CIA to stem the advance of a joint Angolan Government (MPLA) and Cuban offensive northwards out of Luanda, Callan – more psychopath than soldier – led the pack in sheer brutality. His exploits (the murder of some of

his own people as mindlessly as the enemy) are the standard set piece used by opponents of the concept of modern-day "armies for hire" [8].

These objections are well founded. Many of these people were not only beyond the law, but they often instituted their own brutal standards of jurisprudence, sometimes on the very communities they were supposed to be protecting. One bunch of brutal thugs – as we have seen elsewhere in Africa – had replaced another.

But things have changed. It was notable that once Executive Outcomes controlled parts of Sierra Leone, one of the first steps taken by the EO regional commander Colonel Roelf van Heerden was to approach local tribal elders in a bid to establish some sort of framework within which order could be maintained.

During the week that I spent at his regional eastern headquarters – the building was on a hill overlooking Koidu – there was a constant flow of headmen and sub-chiefs in and out of the facility, attending meetings, asking advice or witnessing trials. It was a lengthy process, but Van Heerden, a quiet-spoken former South African army commander – who had set himself up as an ombudsman to protect the interests of local people from an oftendrugged or ill disciplined Sierra Leone Army – would always find time to listen.

An American journalist, Elizabeth Rubin, reported on EO activities in Sierra Leone in a lengthy article for the New York magazine *Harpers*.

The South African mercenaries, she wrote, "were unreservedly hailed by the chiefs, the businessmen and the street people as saviors." At one stage the entire town turned out in a prayer meeting "to ask God to protect those who are protecting us." And they weren't referring to ill-disciplined, usually drunk or drugged Sierra Leone Army but to the mercenaries who were guarding the imaginary walls of Koidu's citadel [9].

Even the British High Commission in Freetown offered EO members serving in the country hospitality on their casual Friday night get-togethers.

During my own visit (which came about a month after EO officers had started dispensing their version of bush justice) several British-trained Sierra Leone officers told me that they had never seen discipline among their troops so good. Prior to that, several army officers had been "fragged" by their soldiers for trying to instill order in the ranks. Although the South African mercenaries had their own short-shrift way of dealing with lawlessness –

usually a thrashing with *sjamboks* [10] – the entire legal process, from the initial hearing to conclusion, took place in the presence of tribal chiefs, mostly elders. They were then requested by Van Heerden to either concur or reject his determinations, which they did, democratically, by a show of hands."

Much of this – and a lot else about mercenaries – is dealt with in my book *War Dog – Fighting Other People's Wars*, published by Casemate in the United States and Britain.

At the end of it, General Ian Douglas, a Canadian negotiator for the UN, stated: "EO gave us this stability [11]. In a perfect world, of course, we wouldn't need an organization like EO, but I'd be loath to say they have to go just because they are mercenaries." Executive Outcomes was to leave Sierra Leone eventually. The British organization Sandline International was supposed to take its place but this effort, sadly, became embroiled in the kind of dispute that only politicians can concoct.

We all know what happened then, or at least we should: By the year 2000, shortly before the British Army and the Royal Navy arrived in Freetown in force and routed the enemy, about 15,000 Sierra Leonean civilians were murdered by the rebels and many more thousands, including children, were maimed by the rebels.

The role of Executive Outcomes personnel in a succession of African forays has been regarded by some observers as remarkably successful, considering that they were active for a comparatively short time. Even its critics must concede that.

Operations eventually included air and ground forays into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (where EO troops prevented the rebels from overrunning the strategic Inga Dam, south-west of the capital) as well as in Kenya, Congo-Brazza, Uganda and elsewhere.

There were even negotiations to send a force into Mexico to quell the Chiapas uprisings in the south. US pressure quickly put a stop to that.

There is no question that while the organization remained in operation, it acquired a very distinct corporate character. EO's first sortie into Angola in March 1993 came after Eeben Barlow was hired to assemble a group of about 50 former South African Special Forces officers and men to lead an attack against a well-entrenched 1,000-strong UNITA force holding the Soyo oil

facility at the mouth of the Congo River, something I deal with in some detail later in this volume.

But it is worth mentioning that in a subsequent briefing, Colonel Hennie Blaauw, a former South African Reconnaissance Regiment commander, disclosed that it was a close-run thing. “We pushed them out, took casualties but they kept coming back… finally, we could do no more. Also, we were running out of ammunition. Then, suddenly they pulled their forces out and were gone. It could easily have gone the other way,” he told me in a comprehensive briefing about the company’s early days while I was at their main operational base Cabo Ledo.

Blaauw said that Soyo was the turning point not only for his EO force but also for the mercenary effort worldwide. “A bunch of professional freelance soldiers had demonstrated what could be achieved on the battlefield and we went in and did the necessary.”

It is notable that there was much skepticism in Luanda, the Angolan capital, when the first bunch of mercenaries arrived, Blaauw subsequently recounted. He told me that some senior Angolan commanders thought it might be a ruse to possibly help launch an anti-government coup, or perhaps just take the money and run.

“But once we had some of our people killed, they could see we were serious. We finally had their trust, but there were still some who doubted our motives. There were still those who believed that we might be working for somebody else, the Americans, perhaps,” he added.

Former EO executives – then and now – have aggressively defended their role in stemming violence. They are unequivocal about their professionalism in doing so. Nor have they denied using internationally accepted legal and financial instruments to secure (and maintain) their deals.

In order to achieve military objectives, they always opted for quick, sharp solutions. Sometimes this meant (as in the grab for the Kono diamond fields in Sierra Leone) combined ground/air surgical strikes where objectives were seized and few prisoners taken. There was certainly no ambiguity about the message they imparted. While EO remained in place, RUF rebels all but suspended their operations in a large part of the country.



South African mercenary aviators at the controls of both Angolan jet fighters and helicopter gunships played a key role in turning the war around in this embattled oil-rich state. (Photo: Author's collection)

Then, when the Executive Outcomes contract was prematurely abrogated (United Nations pressure played a role in this) Foday Sankoh's RUF rebels were again mobilized.

More salient, perhaps is the fact that EO consistently supported only recognized governments, though they had plenty of opportunities to do otherwise. The company tended to avoid regimes unpalatable to the international community. While traveling across Africa with Lafras Luitingh, EO's former operations manager and one of its founder members, he told me of a $100 million offer made by Nigerian dissidents to "train a revolutionary army to overthrow the Abuja government." Nigeria was then ruled by the tyrant Sani Abacha and just about everybody would have liked to see the

back of him.

The plotters intended bringing Nigeria back into the democratic fold, but EO was not to be the instrument, Luitingh stressed. “We couldn’t do it,” he declared. “Nor would we ever support a revolt against the established order,” Luitingh told me on the flight between Luanda and Freetown. “Once you start fiddling in the internal affairs of countries, you can no longer justify your motive of fair play,” he maintained. “Anything else and we would be in the pay of the highest bidder,” he told *Jane’s International Defense Review*.

In any event, he said, that kind of role would have undermined the confidence and trust that EO had worked hard to engender among its clients, a fundamental *raison d’être* for its existence, was his view, and one that was shared by all his partners.

Considering that Executive Outcomes remained a major international player in the business of irregular warfare for less than a decade, an astonishing amount has been written about the organization. At the same time EO challenged just about anybody who suggested that the people it employed were mercenaries: in this regard it proved remarkably litigious.

Throughout, the company has claimed to be nothing more than a military training group, which – as events proved – is nonsense. Even to the most sanguine observer it was obvious that force was used to achieve most of objectives, but then that is what this business is all about.

Its pilots flew helicopter gunships, MiG-23s or Pilatus PC-7s fitted with underwing rocket pods. Much of the controversy involving EO has also centered on the way in which the company was paid for its services. Sometimes it took cash, but that was exceptional. Other times it was a share of resources: diamond or gold mines or even hardwood.

Economic involvement in the affairs of client states, particularly in an impoverished Africa, is controversial. This is especially so among those firms that had a stake in the original EO and which still work in Africa: Branch Energy, Heritage Gas and Oil or the Strategic Resources Group, a British company registered in the Bahamas, included. Consequently articles like “The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict” by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Adams, US Army (Rtd) are really little more of a re-hash of what appeared before [12].



The American group ICI of Oregon has seen action in a dozen countries in recent years, usually in support roles and often under contract to the State Department. Curiously the company prefers to use Russian transport helicopters in these roles, such as this one snapped by the author at a Freetown military base in Sierra Leone.

Truth is, apart from in the book *War Dog*, almost nobody has seriously analyzed the factors that contributed to EO's success.

Money is certainly at the root of it. Interestingly, all of EO's directors made a lot of it in a comparatively short time. Luitingh, for instance, before he joined EO, was a regular officer with South Africa's Special Forces. Today he is a dollar millionaire. That is hardly surprising for an organization that was grossing between $25 million and $40 million a year, though London's *Daily Telegraph* put the amount at double that.

The South African economy played a significant role in this transition. Once President Nelson Mandela had taken over government from former President F.W. de Klerk and empowered those who were formerly disenfranchised, almost all of them black, "colored" or Indian, things changed dramatically. Suddenly, a lot of white South Africans found themselves out of work.

The majority were competent, experienced fighting men with years of combat experience on the border. Almost overnight they had become

destitute. The fact that the South African currency moved sharply lower didn't help. Consequently, by the time that EO came along, the prospect for working tax-free (and, in the majority of projects, for US dollars) appealed to many military old-timers.



South African military veteran Cobus Claassens who distinguished himself while serving with Executive Outcomes, went on to form an anti-piracy unit in West Africa under the auspices of both the government and the European Union. He used a handful of semi-rigid boats in this role with remarkable success. (Photo: Author)

By international standards, most South African operators of all races were paid a fraction of what the average European mercenary would regard as bottom line. Still, black or white, there was never any shortage of applicants at EO's Pretoria headquarters, one of the executives told me.

EO's success in the field in remote, hostile, often-unfriendly Third World regions was due largely to three basic interlocking disciplines and these were all but sacrosanct.

The first was that no ground operation was contemplated without adequate top cover. For this purpose the company acquired several Mi-17 gunships of its own, details about which can be found in a book that deals with Neall

Ellis, the world's most famous mercenary aviator, titled *Gunship Ace*.

The second principal centered on good, practical military experience. EO's command actively encouraged resolute, often independent tactics to achieve an objective and most times that didn't come out of books.

Last came discipline and it was strictly enforced. At EO's Cabo Ledo base on the coast south of Luanda in Angola, the T-shirts worn by some of the men had a motto emblazoned on the back which read: "Fit in or F*** off". Anyone who stepped out of line was put on the first plane home.

Obviously there was a lot that these mercenaries had in common, including a shared and empathetic military background with years in the bush together. Another important factor was a common language, Afrikaans, which allowed an additional measure of security in radio communications.

One of the first comments made by an EO escort officer was that the company liked to nurture a clear and cohesive identity. Language and the Southern African connection forged this, he said. It mattered little that some of the black troops were from Namibia, formerly South West Africa: they had fought alongside their South Africans colleagues for most of their adult lives and regarded themselves as part of a system that had evolved during 21 years of war against hostile neighbors.

Also, while the very occasional European (but never an American) would make it into EO's ranks, you needed to be able to speak – or at very least, understand the language – to be accepted within the ranks.

Consequently just about all operational radio comms were in Afrikaans. Thus, in Sierra Leone (during the first phase of EO operations) though Sankoh's rebels were often better equipped than government forces and were able to intercept EO radio traffic – sometimes almost at will – they understood little of it. This was especially valuable during intense ground and air contacts in the Battle of Freetown when communications lines were open.

Where EO did come short during its Angolan operations was in internal security. On at least one occasion that this writer knows of, UNITA's Jonas Savimbi managed to infiltrate one of his people into EO ranks. That man, a radio operator, worked out of EO's Saurimo regional base in the diamond-rich north-east of the country and he was responsible, as far as is known, for compromising at least two clandestine helicopter drops. That effort, I was told, resulted in the deaths of all concerned; about eight men in total.

Because UNITA troops were in the vicinity of both drops, the local EO

commander set a trap and it worked, though in discussing it with me, he was evasive about detail. The radio operator disappeared without trace shortly afterwards; the man's family was told that he had been killed in a skirmish with the enemy and his insurance was paid without argument [13].

Once EO had been disbanded and there was more trouble in some of the countries in which it had formerly been active – Angola, specifically both the Luanda government and the rebel leader Savimbi – started recruiting former EO veterans [14].

An immediate and almost intractable problem was that the easy camaraderie of the past gave way to tension and distrust. Nobody was quite certain exactly for whom his buddies might be working. On the positive side, one of the unassailable EO strengths was that it had intimate knowledge and understanding of the continent on which so many of its troops had been born. Almost everybody involved had grown up there. None of the men who went into Angola or Sierra Leone were under any of the sort of misconceptions that are of concern to the average European or American combatants who might suddenly find themselves among the disadvantaged, Somalia being the classic example [15].



“Gunning up” the lone Mi-24 helicopter gunship flown by mercenary Neall Ellis against the rebels in Sierra Leone. His story is revealed in detail in his biography Gunship Ace. (Photo: Author)

The people around Freetown, for example, were indigent when EO first arrived and they still are. The majority had been oppressed by a string of dictators since independence from Britain in 1960. These were people who were not all that dissimilar from the throngs of black Angolans or ethnic Namibians with whom EO members had been associated in the past.

More to the point, company personnel didn’t have to be told what the region in which they were active could – *and could not* – provide. They were familiar with the continent and understood its strengths and its foibles for the simple reason that Africa, as always, is the ultimate leveler.

It hardly needed to be stressed among EO recruits that the conditions that they faced were tough, demanding and uncompromising. Or that most regions where they found themselves were among the most primitive and demanding on any continent. Militarily, this was an environment in which many of them, so to say, had been weaned.

Also, their relations with the people – from the President on down – needed to be exemplary. If a man could not relate equitably with black folk, he had no place in the organization. There were (and are still) many examples of interracial strife elsewhere on the continent and while the South Africans haven’t exactly been paragons of racial equality in the past, they understood and could empathize with the people with whom they worked.

Not so some Europeans who are recruited on mercenary contracts. One example: Mobutu engaged a number of Balkan mercenaries – Bosnians and Croats – during the final stages of Kabila’s campaign. Throughout their period of service they were surly and often unconscionably arrogant and uncommunicative towards those with whom they were associated. Consequently, very little was achieved when it came to fighting what should have been a common enemy.

This kind of mindset is never likely to engender trust, that single essential for success in any Third World country. At the same time, while EO executives would quickly ingratiate themselves with the military leadership, there was actually very little socializing between EO officers and top brass wherever they operated.

Further down the ranks, there was none at all.

Prior to going into a country, while still negotiating a contract, EO functionaries would state clearly and in writing what exactly they were able to offer and what it was that they intended to achieve. Having agreed on essentials (and with a contract price on the table) other parameters would be tackled.

This would include issues such as objectives, who would fund what and cost, equipment and weapons systems, support aircraft and exactly what EO would bring to the party. Other aspects detailed security, internal movement, bases and airports to which the mercenary unit would have access.

Further discussions would detail accommodation (usually serviced apartments in the capital, with attendant staff), liaison with and possible training of local forces, lines of command, supplies, rations, the evacuation of casualties, discipline and the all-important demarcation of responsibility between government representatives and the newly arrived fighting teams. All the headings would be tabulated and recorded and then both parties would sign the related documents.

Yet it didn't always work that way. In Angola, early on, while EO did have a contract, some issues related to security were fudged, mainly because it took a while for the Angolans to accept these maverick South Africans as their allies. Consequently there were confrontations between EO officers and members of a notorious black-uniformed special police unit colloquially known as "Ninjas'.

Tough, evil-minded and well trained, their officers regarded the white Africans with manifest distrust. At one stage they hampered movement until there was a shoot-out at the Saurimo air base. None of EO's men were killed, though some were wounded.



American mercenary Dave McGrady with a field commander of the South Lebanese Army against the backdrop of one of several American M113s issued to this anti-Hezbollah force by the IDF. (Photo: Dave McGrady)

By the time I stepped off EO's Boeing 727 at Saurimo, most of these issues had been resolved, but I could sense that there was little love lost between the two adversaries. This became clear after I had taken a picture of a derelict MiG-23 parked on the runway. There was nothing "secret" about the jet: it had been photographed by just about everyone in the unit.

Nevertheless, a Ninja commissar had me arrested and my camera

confiscated. Since it was a matter of precedent and the process could be repeated, it took Hennie Blaauw and another EO director hours to settle the matter.

As one of them said afterwards, “you never know how these people react. You need to be cautious *and civil* at all times.”

Having had its share of experiences with dysfunctional Angolans, EO was determined that it shouldn’t happen in Sierra Leone. They insisted from the start that they should have access to the president at all times, immediate and unrestricted, which they got.

On our first day in Freetown, I accompanied Lafras Luitingh on a social call to State House. It came after a single phone call to his office and 30 minutes later there was a one-on-one between the two men during which time they discussed diamond concessions. Communications and logistics were two other priorities.

At EO’s global headquarters in a large peri-urban estate on the outskirts of Pretoria, the company maintained a 24-hour radio watch. It had staff in constant touch with all its interests and units in Africa. Signals, routine checks, domestic messages and needs lists would constantly be patched through, sometimes, in Sierra Leone’s case, using an Angolan station as a booster.

Transport remained EO’s strongest card, especially in Africa. The company acquired two Boeing 727s from American Airlines for $500,000 each, both planes being unsuitable for the US because of excessive noise limits, which means that they got two almost-new passenger jets for a song. Other aircraft that EO brought in included King Airs and two former RAF transport aircraft for medical evacuation purposes, which ended up ferrying more critical malaria cases to overseas hospitals than wounded personnel.

Without its own aircraft, EO would never have been able to operate effectively. With the exception of Southern Africa, movement around the rest of sub-Saharan Africa is often uncertain and it is not getting better. With daily demands being made on an organization with such vast and diverse interests, it would have been impossible for the mercenary company to work the way it did without its own transport.

Through another British subsidiary company, the Luanda-registered Ibis Air, EO operated on average, two flights a week (initially from Lanseria and later, from Johannesburg International Airport) to Angola, calling first at the

Cabo Ledo training base south of Luanda, and then on to Saurimo and, if circumstances allowed, Luanda. Flights to Freetown's Lungi International Airport were every fortnight, with a refueling stop at Luanda in both directions.

While some of the heavier equipment, such as vehicles, ammunition (where applicable) and other supplies went by sea, just about everything else that a force in the field needed to wage a war was ferried in by plane. This included the company's perishable food supplies, spares, medical equipment, radios and the rest. It took about six hours to load the plane and apart from what was in the hold, the stuff would be piled up in every available space in the passenger section. Towards the end, EO added a maritime unit that worked off the Sierra Leone coast. Whoever was responsible for EO's logistics, knew his business.

I was kitted out for a bush foray at the company's main depot, a large storehouse at the Aberdeen military base on the outskirts of Freetown. Much of the equipment was the same that the South African Army had used in Angola: with that war over, it had been sold as surplus.

There has been criticism about the company's efficacy as a fighting force which, from personal experience, I know is simply unwarranted. EO achieved most of the objectives for which it was tasked, and anybody who had anything to do with the company found that to be the case in all departments. Bottom line: this was a highly professional military body.

Indeed, it probably would not have lasted a year in the tough, combative Angolan environment had this not been so. Planning and pre-battle liaison throughout for ground and air support elements was meticulous and always involved the participation of unit commanders.

What remained a fairly consistent problem in both Angola and the Congo was language, particularly among those flying support roles such as gunships and support jets.

Military air traffic control communications with military air bases was mostly in Portuguese, or, as was the case in the Congo, French. It was different on the ground: while few of the officers could speak either, many of their black troops could.

1 Personal telephone interview with the writer, December, 1998

2 James Rupert, Washington Post Foreign Service: "Diamond Hunters Fuel Africa's Brutal Wars": October 16, 1999

3 "The Russians are Coming" *US News and World Report*; 15 March, 1999.

4 *Jane's Intelligence Review*, London, November, 1999

5 Personal interview with Denard, Rivonia, Johannesburg, March, 1992

6 *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, January 27, 1998

7 The writer used his own ties with the LFC to facilitate this development.

8 The mercenary Callan and several of his group (including several Americans) was captured by government forces, tried by a military tribunal in Luanda and executed by firing squad.

9 "An Army of One's Own"; *Harpers* New York, pp 44-55, Elizabeth Rubin, February, 1997

10 Heavy-duty leather strips usually of hippo hide and often associated with brutal Boer justice in South Africa during the Apartheid era.

11 Rubin Ibid.

12 *Parameters*: US Army War College Quarterly, Summer, 1999.

13 Interview with Colonel Hennie Blaauw, EO base commander at Saurimo, NE Angola.

14 Personal interviews with Arthur Walker, Carl Alberts, Neall Ellis and "Juba" Joubert in Pretoria, Luanda and Freetown.

15 Interestingly, one of the last projects in which Lafras Luitingh was involved was in forming – in association with former Blackwater owner Erik Prince – a mercenary unit that included a gunship wing and handled security in Puntland, a semi-autonomous Somali region.

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICA'S GREAT MERCENARY TRADITION

Mercenaries – hired guns – are in a class of their own. Though there have been thousands of these freebooters active in scores of wars on almost all continents since the end of World War II very few have made their mark. Manuel Ferreira, an erstwhile military intelligence member/operative, worked with Bob Denard in the Comoros Archipelago, a clutch of several islands strategically positioned at the northern entrance to the Mozambique Channel.
Ferreira tells us something about mercenary lore…

The most prominent of the mercenary bunch – in the English-speaking world – is Colonel Mike Hoare, "Mad" Mike to those who know him well. The appellation originally came from the East Germans who despised this former British Army captain for curtailing vigorous Soviet efforts at Congolese dislocation in the 1960s. Wikipedia describes him as follows:

> "Hoare was born in India. He spent his early days in Ireland and was educated in England. He served in North Africa as an armor officer in the British Army during World War II. After the war, he completed his training as a chartered accountant, qualified in 1948 and emigrated to Durban where he ran safaris and became a soldier-for-hire in various African countries."

The name of Mike Hoare will always be linked to the Congo in that difficult period following that troubled African country's independence from

Belgium. His first mercenary action was with 4 Commando in Katanga in 1960/61: the Congo's southern province tried to break away from the authority of the central government in Leopoldville (Kinshasa today).

Three years later he was hired by Moïse Tshombe, the Congolese Prime Minister, to lead 5 Commando, a 300-man unit composed almost entirely of South Africans [1].

His most distinguished role came soon afterwards when Hoare and his men, in concert with Belgian paratroopers, a bunch of Cuban exile pilots flying Harvard trainers as well as CIA-hired mercenaries, all worked in concert in a desperate bid to save the lives of 1,600 civilians, mostly Europeans and missionaries. The operation took place in and around Stanleyville (Kisangani) and was dubbed Operation Dragon Rouge by its planners. Sadly, many of the victims who had been taken hostage by the rebels were murdered.



GP troops on parade in Moroni. (Photo: Manuel Ferreira collection)

On a totally different mercenary tack is former South African Air Force Colonel Neall Ellis, today regarded as the world's most famous mercenary

aviator. Still flying support missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Ellis over the decades has seen action in a dozen wars on three continents. Much of this action is detailed in Neall Ellis's biography, *Gunship Ace* [2].

Finally, there is Colonel Bob Denard, a French military professional who turned the fortunes of aspiring mercenaries sideways by taking over an independent African state. Denard invaded the Comoro island group four times all told, and successfully ruled the independent Republic of the Comoros for more than a decade in what some saw as his personal fiefdom. It is worth mentioning that his story follows the tradition of that excellent film directed by John Huston and called *The Man who Would be King*. Although the two main characters in the movie were Sean Connery and Michael Caine, Denard, a real-life French mercenary who took an island state and kept it for himself, is even more flamboyant than anything on screen, because in his case it really happened.

South Africans were involved there as well. Eventually a number of clandestine operations linked to Black Africa, Israel and the Falklands War – many of them emanating from Pretoria – could be traced back to this island group.

Moroni, the Comorian capital under Bob Denard, whose private life was often as tumultuous as his military interventions, headed the three-island *Union des Comores*. It was to become a simmering cauldron of intrigue and subterfuge. The end came in 1989 when Denard was removed, this time at the behest of French President François Mitterand. The Élysée Palace sent a powerful naval force to the island group from La Réunion and Denard was evacuated to South Africa by a French Para group.

A few words about the Comoros, a curiously remote and independent African outpost north-west of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean… desperately poor, it has embraced a blizzard of languages and boasts an exotic history that goes back centuries. There is a fourth island (actually two with several associated islets, neatly linked across a narrow stretch of water and listed on the charts as Mayotte) but it decided in 1974 to remain French. Like Tahiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, it chose not to seek independence from France and it is still administered directly from Paris as an overseas department. Interestingly, Mayotte is scheduled to become the outermost region of the European Union in January 2014.

With a population of less than a million, the independent Union of the

Comoros is not only the third-smallest African state; it is also the southernmost member of the Arab League. That means it has three official languages: Arabic, French and Comorian… a language based on several dialects derived from Kiswahili and that is spoken throughout the archipelago. Its brief history following independence from France in 1975 has been checkered. Army rebellions were followed by coups d'état and much turmoil resulted, which is why the diminutive territory's history is among the most complex of all the world's developing countries. A lot of this dislocation stemmed from Islamic influences, one of the reasons why, for a time, it called itself the *République Fédérale Islamique des Comores*.

The following timeline provides some of the background. Its first president, Ahmed Abdallah, declared his country unilaterally independent on July 6, 1975.

Eight months later, French mercenary Bob Denard – with clandestine support from Jacques Foccart, the *éminence grise* of post-war French politics, and a specialist in covert operations in Africa – overthrew Abdallah in an armed coup and replaced him with Prince Said Mohammed Jaffar. He didn't last very long and was ousted by Ali Soilih, who was a virulently anti-French radical socialist. Paris suspended all aid to the island state and Denard left the islands because of what was termed at the time "incompatibility of ideals…"

In May 1978, Denard returned to overthrow President Soilih and reinstate Abdallah, again with the support of the French, but this time the Rhodesian and South African governments were also involved.

Soilih's brief rule had been characterized by some of the most brutal actions launched by any African tyrant and seven additional putsch attempts did not help either. While in power he told his people that he had been divinely blessed by Allah to rule and was himself kin to the Prophet Muhammad.

He tolerated no opposition and murdered his opponents at will. When his people protested, he had them gunned down, which was what happened at the massacre of Comorians in Majumba and again at Iconi. Meanwhile Soilih maintained that he took his instructions directly from Allah and it wasn't long before consensus was reached – both on the islands and in France – that the man had gone totally off his trolley. Obviously, the French had to do something and they prepared Abdallah, the country's original ruler, for a comeback. At the same time somebody from French Intelligence had been visiting the Denard home.

The Frenchman's second coup is worthy of a movie in itself. Its theme and *modus operandi* feature strongly in the book *The Dogs of War*, written by British author Frederick Forsyth and concerning a mercenary seaborne invasion very much along the lines of what actually happened. It was codenamed Operation Atlantis, and there is no question that both Monsieur Foccart and the French Government were involved.



South African Military Intelligence member/operative Manuel Ferreira worked with Colonel Bob Denard in the Comoros archipelago.

Denard and a group of his trusty lieutenants scoured a number of European harbors in search of an old but still seaworthy ship that they could use in what was to become a classic "one-ship" invasion. They found the rust bucket *Antinea* in a French port, gave her a paint job and made her seaworthy before setting off down the African coast in April 1978. With Denard was his little clique of 46 handpicked "volunteers", many of them having seen action

with him in the Congo and against the Egyptian Army in the Yemen. Four sailors were hired to ensure that Denard and his men reached the Comoros.

The men had been well equipped – obviously by the French Government – with a range of automatic weapons, mortars and other war matériel. En route a great deal of attention was given to planning: each day the men would hone their fighting skills and become thoroughly acquainted with the hardware they would be using to achieve these aims.

The ship rounded the Cape and then headed into the Indian Ocean. After 33 days at sea the invasion group arrived off Moroni harbor on the night of May 13, 1978. The men had spent a day off one of the other islands because the skipper took a wrong turn on the way to Grande Comore. The otherwise competent captain had to ask a local for directions to Moroni and the latter was taken into custody to prevent him alerting the authorities. He was released in the capital after the invasion.

There is no question that what Bob Denard set out to do was precarious. Had things gone haywire, his relatively small group of insurrectionists would almost certainly have been put up against a wall and shot by Soilih's people. In the end it was preplanning that did it and Denard's small band of warriors succeeded in completing the task at hand in little more than two hours.

Having gone ashore clandestinely in several small boats, his men first overcame troops guarding the port. They then neutralized the local militia before mortaring a nearby army barracks, which caused almost all the Comorian soldiers to flee. President Soilih, with nowhere to go, sought refuge in the palace under his bed, where he was found, naked and in the company of two young women. He was taken into custody and later killed, though nobody ever claimed responsibility.

Denard immediately had all political prisoners released from the island's jails, made a public declaration over state radio that he was acting on behalf of the "oppressed" people of the Comoros and, within days, he and his men gained control of the two remaining islands, Anjouan and Moheli. By then, as previously arranged, President Abdallah was on his way back from Paris. Meantime, as Stage Two of the deal, contact was established with both Rhodesia and South Africa and Denard created his famed *Garde Présidentielle*, the Presidential Guard or, as the men knew it, the GP.



Colonel Denard during his final passing review of his loyal *Garde Presidentielle* (GP) troops before handing them over to the commander of the French force that was airlifted into the Comoros to oust him. That action forced Denard to fly into exile in South Africa. (Photo: Manuel Ferreira collection)

Denard remained the *de facto* ruler of the island group for the next eleven years and, with the help of a substantial group of French and South African nationals, built the GP into a formidable force of 500 highly trained Comorian soldiers. Manuel Ferreira, multilingual in English, French, Portuguese and Afrikaans, was at the fulcrum. In time, he formed close ties with the man he was often to fondly refer to as *Mon colonel*.

This new order didn't come without its requisite share of hiccups. There were several attempted coups by opposition groups, some of them with foreign funding from countries that resented the presence of a mercenary force in the Indian Ocean. Then, towards the end of November 1986 and quite unexpectedly, President Abdallah was murdered. Denard meantime had converted to Islam and taken one of the island beauties as a wife. His first marriage had been to a Jewish girl in Morocco, followed by a torrent of liaisons and the birth of several children before his only other actual marriage on Grande Comore.

In 1989, French forces invaded all three islands, bringing to an end both Denard's rule and his by-now rickety relationship with South African Military Intelligence. Two weeks later he and his men, under escort, were on their way to South Africa. He stayed on in Pretoria until February 1993, when he returned to face trial in France.

But Denard wasn't quite done with the islands. In 1995, he launched "Operation Kachkazi," his final coup in the Comores. Loyal to his former black GP colleagues, he returned in strength and, with some popular local support, released those of his old colleagues and friends who had been jailed by the new order.

France soon put an end to that putsch with French naval and marine detachments invading Grande Comore. Denard and his band of merry men were arrested and ousted.

Bob Denard, born in April 1929, had been conscripted into the French Army on leaving school. After a circuitous route, he became the international community's most famous, indeed notorious "War Dog".

Some of this inclination, say friends, must have been inherited because he came from a family with strong military ties: Denard Snr. had served as a soldier in the French concession in China.

Having spent time with the French Navy in Indochina and in French Algeria, the still youthful Denard got himself a job as a policeman in Morocco from 1952 to 1957. But even there he got into trouble and served more than a year in prison for involvement in what was termed "an attempted attack against the Minister of State Pierre Mendes France." Acquitted in 1957, he was repatriated to France.

His role as a staunch anti-communist was soon recognized in Paris and Denard was called on to take part in several covert operations. In the process he handled several government-funded "jobs" in support of *Françafrique* (a term referring to France's sphere of influence in her former colonies).

Denard began his mercenary career with secessionist troops in Katanga in December 1961, making a name for himself thereafter by rescuing a number of white civilians who had been encircled and taken hostage by a brutal bunch of revolutionaries. These revolutionaries called themselves the Simbas (lions) and their headquarters during the course of "Operation Dragon Rouge" was in Stanleyville.

This was no "spontaneous" anti-government rebellion. The Simbas had good backing from the Chinese and some Cuban irregulars, including Ché Guevara. Opposing "pro-Western" forces were tacitly backed by the CIA and Belgium. Denard was in charge of his own unit of French mercenaries called *Les Affreux* (literally, "The Terrible Ones"). Later, on behalf of Tshombe,

Denard helped put down an attempted coup by Katangan separatists in July 1966. At one stage, he was wounded and flown out with a group of more seriously wounded men to Rhodesia in a hijacked civilian aircraft, regarded today as the first recorded instance of the hijacking of a commercial passenger plane.

His final role in the Congolese debacle was when he sided with Katangan separatists and Belgian mercenaries led by the mercurial Jean “Black Jack” Schramme in a revolt in eastern Congo. Following a string of successes again the largely disorganized Congolese army and air force, the dissidents were bottled up in Bukavu, in the extreme eastern part of the country. Taking matters into his own hands, Denard invaded Katanga with a force of 100 men on bicycles in an attempt to create a diversion for a Bukavu breakout, but that episode ended in disarray.

The Frenchman is known to have operated or participated in conflicts in Biafra, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, Benin, Gabon, Angola, Congo/Brazzaville, Zaire, Libya, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mauritania and the Comoros.

According to Frederick Forsyth – who was in Biafra at the time – Denard went to the enclave, by then completely surrounded by Nigerian forces, took one look at the odds and told the rebel leader Ojukwu that he and his men wanted out. The Biafrans had no option but to put them onto the first aircraft back to Gabon and, as Forsyth recalls, Denard didn’t bother to return the hefty cash advance that he and his men had been given by the rebel command.

From 1968 to 1978 he was employed in support of the government in Gabon where he was temporarily based and from where he carried out military actions on behalf of the French Government in Africa.

While Denard might have been involved in a raid against Guinea in 1970, he was certainly involved in the failed 1977 coup attempt, codenamed *Opération Crevette*, in Dahomey (today’s Benin). By all accounts the attempt was betrayed from the inside because opponents of the Denard group were ready for them at Cotonou Airport. Although Jacques Foccart denied personal knowledge of the attempted coup after its failure, he did recognize that it had been backed by the Togolese leader Gnassingbé Eyadéma, Houphouet-Boigny of the Ivory Coast, Omar Bongo of Gabon and Morocco’s King Hassan II, all of whom were strongly allied to France at the time.

One of Denard’s more interesting mercenary episodes involved him and some of his colleagues working with a secret British Special Air Service

group in the Yemeni mountains to the north of Sana'a, countering Egyptian Army and Air Force efforts to subjugate the country. The Brits were led by Colonel Jim Johnson, an old friend of Al Venter who gave him a first-hand account of much of what had gone on in the Arabian Peninsula at the time. Johnson had kept back some magnificent photographs of a campaign that lasted for three years and which very effectively thwarted Nasser's efforts at Arab domination of a significant corner of the Middle East.

Notably, it was a campaign where the British worked hand-in-glove with the Israelis (who supplied some of the support aircraft), the Jordanians (responsible for liaising with all the players) and the Saudis who funded the operation. Jim Johnson recalls flying to Amman in a chartered plane and sitting directly behind Jordan's King Hussein and Moshe Dayan, Israel's most famous wartime general. As he recalls, the two men were involved in a series of "animated discussions" throughout almost the entire flight.

Johnson's most successful efforts involved sabotaging Egyptian warplanes in night raids: it happened so often that Nasser eventually pulled his forces back from the eastern side of the Red Sea [3].

Speaking of some of these events in later years, Bob Denard said that it had never been dull… one interesting episode followed another.

"My thirty years of the mercenary life brought me into contact with men of courage and idealism, men with often princely qualities who risked their lives, many dying for the cause they had adopted as their own, men who offset by far those who thought the mercenary life an easy road to riches and glory or whose actions at times brought us into disrepute."

In 1979 the French Secret Services put Denard in touch with Pretoria, and he held talks with the Chief of Military Intelligence, General P.W. van der Westhuizen. The South Africans were eager to engage because it was held that the Comores might help South Africa break out of its isolation, gain access to the Mozambique Channel together with the airport at Moroni on Grand Comore island, which they subsequently rebuilt so that it could take large aircraft.

According to Manuel Ferreira, South African Military Intelligence agents visited Moroni and inspected the *Garde Présidentielle* and its installations. A few days after their return to Pretoria, Denard was informed that the South Africans were ready to help. In return for funding the GP, the South Africans

requested that they be allowed to establish a permanent Electronic Warfare (EW) station on the islands and President Abdallah approved the request.

Pretoria's presence on the Comoros would last until January 1990 and throughout, all South African military projects launched from there were classified Top Secret. Even today, very little is still known about them.



Denard's mercenary forces haul out some heavier stuff for a review – in this case a rear-mounted Dshka 12.7 mm heavy machine gun. (Photo: Manuel Ferreira collection)

Over a decade, South Africa helped the Comoros with economic and rural development, funded and created a farm, engaged in road construction, provided humanitarian assistance, built holiday resorts and much more. The South African Department of Foreign Affairs also opened a mission in Moroni and appointed a permanent representative. Ferreira tells us that South African military personnel serving on the Comoros were accorded the rank of second lieutenant, with the commander of his group a full lieutenant in the GP.

"In the first years of our presence on the Comoros, personnel were issued with GP military cards bearing false identities and tours of duty usually lasted three months. The electronic warfare station was operational 365 days a year and the entire central and northern Mozambique as well as Tanzania was

‘targeted’ by the EW station, FRELIMO and South Africa’s African National Congress being the main focus.

“South African military doctors were also permanently deployed with the GP, responsible for all medical care concerning GP personnel. More serious cases were flown to Pretoria and admitted to a closed, secret ward at 1 Military Hospital staffed by personnel with top secret security clearances.

“Military Intelligence also sent South African military instructors to the Comores to train the GP and selected members were sent to South Africa to attend various military courses. A fairly large group of Comorian troops was sent to Tempe, the military base outside Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, for training as paratroopers.

“In 1989, a small group of specialists from South Africa’s crack Reconnaissance Regiment (Recces) trained GP soldiers and Deputy Chief of Staff, Intelligence, General Joep Joubert flew to the Comoros for the graduation ceremony. From 1988 a full-time Military Intelligence liaison officer was permanently stationed in Moroni.



At the unit's GP base 'Charlie' – South Africans Tony & Ian. (Photo: Ian C. Highley)

"About then, Pretoria's Foreign Affairs representative in Moroni became outspokenly critical of the GP and of Denard. He eventually became such a problem that we were ordered by Pretoria to target him, which meant that every time he picked up his phone and spoke to his bosses in Pretoria, we taped everything.

"The diplomat was eventually expelled by President Abdallah, but by then Denard had become a lot less visible and active in the day-to-day operations of the GP. His deputy, Commandant Marques, took over, though we still saw Denard almost daily, usually at lunchtime in the officers' mess. It was almost a ritual with him, making a point of shaking hands with each of us and wishing us a friendly *bon appétit.*

"Bob Denard, whom we had come to appreciate with time, was the ultimate officer and gentleman !"

With time, this rather distinguished Frenchman, who, by then, was already something of a legend in military circles, was to become more entangled in Pretoria's sometimes bizarre machinations in Africa north of the Zambezi. Working from some of his personal correspondence, Ferreira tells us of an interesting event that, until now, appears to have slipped between the cracks.

As the Falklands War between Britain and Argentina escalated, Pretoria instructed Denard to arrange a secret landing of two large cargo planes at Hahaya, the island airport. Pretoria sent a C-130 loaded with military equipment for the Argentine Forces and Denard recalled that the instructions were that everything had to be offloaded and transferred to a DC-8 that carried Panamanian registration. He wasn't told what the contents were, but the inference was clear: the Frenchman was responsible for overseeing its safe transfer.

Denard: "The work was almost complete when one of my officers called me. 'Take a look, Colonel !' as he opened one of the containers. I could easily see the shape of a missile before my officer closed the container. I knew that Armscor was not capable of manufacturing such a weapon. As the DC-8 taxied out and took off, I realized that the South Africans were being used as a relay by either France or Israel."

Not long afterwards, authorization was granted for a request by General van der Westhuizen that a South African Airways Boeing 737 be painted in Air Comoros livery. This plane would fly the Nairobi route, assuring the

South Africans of contact with Dar es Salaam, the Seychelles, Mauritius, Lilongwe in Malawi and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia as well as enabling the transport of pilgrims to Mecca.

"I emphasize that this route would not have been possible without the GP, which undertook the security of the international airport of Hahaya.

"Another operation saw me arranging for Comorian passports to be issued to South African agents in order to allow them to take delivery of five Dakota DC-3 aircraft in New Zealand."

A while later, General van der Westhuizen was succeeded as Chief of Staff, Intelligence, by Vice Admiral Dries Putter, who told Denard that he wasn't able to increase financial support for his island operation. But, he assured the mercenary leader, he would be a lot more cooperative than his predecessor. He said that more Comorians would be allowed to go to South Africa for "quality instruction in transmissions and mechanical matters" as well as a lot else besides. It was then that a section was sent to Tempe for the Parabat course.

"The Admiral also furnished us with enough munitions for our requirements. Despite financial difficulties, the GP managed to preserve its prestige with the population and maintain the highest standards of all units of the Comorian Forces.

"Pretoria's Secret Service then informed me that because of the United Nations arms embargo against South Africa, they were experiencing difficulties in purchasing weapons for the Angolan rebel movement UNITA. That guerrilla movement, led by Swiss-educated Dr Jonas Savimbi, was the main anti-communist force opposing the MPLA-led government in Angola. I went to work and after making contact with some arms merchants in Hong Kong, we found the weapons in China that UNITA urgently required.

"It was interesting that China's leaders in Beijing, regardless of the arms embargo and of UNITA's lack of enthusiasm for Chinese political ideology, were willing to trade. It was an excellent opportunity for the Chinese to take a swipe at the Soviets, who supported the MPLA. Even better, the South Africans were willing to pay good money, and that always talked very loudly in the weapons trade.

"My position on the Comoros enabled me to furnish South African agents with the passports they used to move between South Africa and Hong Kong as well as Switzerland in order to finalize the deal. I assured their protection

in Europe, undertaken by a GP member who had served in the Rhodesian Army. Obviously I also kept my old bosses informed: throughout the negotiation process, I was able to brief *Direction Générale de la Sécurité* (DGSE), the French External Intelligence Agency, and it wasn't in their interests to do anything to hinder me."

As Manuel Ferreira commented years later, it was small wonder that the AK-47s issued to Comorian troops were Chinese-manufactured.

Ferreira recalls the day he first met the famous Frenchman.

"I was sitting in my office getting ready to join Denard's bunch when the telephone rang. A female major from Counter Intelligence said she wanted to see me. Her office was just a couple of floors above mine in the Liberty Life Building, Headquarters of Military Intelligence in the heart of Pretoria.

The woman told me that MI had a few of questions for me, and that happened just days before my departure for the Comoros, the first of many deployments to those beautiful islands.

" 'What passport do you use?' she asked.

" 'Mine,' I replied.

"She was shocked. 'You can't use your own passport. I'll have to issue you with another one.'

"I argued that there wasn't time for a new passport to be issued. I'd have to use the one already in my possession and with my name in it.

" 'What's your cover story ?' the major asked.

" 'I am a Belgian businessman,' I replied.

"At least she liked that answer.

"Then she queried: 'Who in your family knows that you are going to the Comores? Who will take you to the airport ?'

"Just my wife and my mother,' I told her.

"Again she was shocked. 'That's a breach of security !' she argued.

"Patiently, I had to explain to her that my mother also worked at Intelligence Headquarters and in the very same division where I had my office, and that my wife had also been in the Defence Force for many years. I also mentioned that as a nurse, she was in regular contact with Comorian patients.

"The major still wasn't happy. She spent the next 15 minutes telling me what I could and could not do. I almost felt like a primary school kid being

berated by a boring teacher. I was about to tell her a few home truths, but then thought the better of it and let matters lie… counter intelligence personnel can sometimes be annoying in the way they go about their jobs, and this was one of them.

“Finally I went to the airport and flew to the Comores, excited that I was about to meet a man whom I admired enormously. His friends and adversaries would label him The Great Pirate, or the Greatest Dog of War of all Time. To me, the name Bob Denard said it all.

“We landed at Hahaya Airport, north of Moroni and, as I disembarked, the humidity hit me. It was mid-summer in the Southern Hemisphere and it was like stepping out of the aircraft into a sauna bath. The colonel’s troops patrolled the entire area, both in the airport and its environs.

“I was fetched from Hahaya and taken to the camp where I saw a couple of familiar faces, which was when everyone told me about the great New Year’s party that would be held that night for the Presidential Guard. And so it was, an enormous occasion, with everybody going to the *Centre Nautique* – the officers’ mess of the Presidential Guard – for a gigantic New Year’s party.

When we got there it was already dark and I could see that entire area was surrounded by dozens of heavily armed black troops.

“What’s going on ?’ I asked. ‘Is Bob worried about an attempt on his life ?’ Apparently not, came the reply. This was how things were done on special occasions.

“On entering the mess, I caught my first glimpse of the man when he was pointed out to me, sitting alongside his lovely Comorian wife. There was no question: he radiated a commanding presence.



Colonel Bob Denard with some of his ‘trophies’. The ship’s wheel came from the HMS Antinéa, a rust bucket in which he and his men sailed from Lorient in France to Moroni, with a brief stopover in Las Palmas. (Photo: Fiona Capstick)

“It was quite an occasion, with the best of French cuisine, seafood and Dom Perignon champagne. As the clock ticked towards midnight, the party became more rowdy. While some of Bob’s men began to get a bit out of hand, he spent the whole evening sitting quietly next to his wife at the head of the table.

“I got to know Bob Denard a good deal better with time and we had several other enjoyable functions in his company. I also discovered that despite that raucous New Year’s party, which was quite a rambunctious affair, the colonel was actually a quiet man who never indulged in the kind of braggadocio behavior one might have expected from somebody with his reputation.”

In retrospect, it became clear to us all that the professional Colonel Bob Denard had made much of his life.

This mercurial private soldier had his own three islands, an army that he

personally commanded and, to top it, the man was simply irresistible to woman. To those who met him for the first time, the Frenchman could be utterly charming. He was also living proof that bravery, secrecy and loyalty remain the keys to survival in whatever war or battle in which you are involved.

There are those who will add that he was also able to give a pretty good account of himself in a court of law, for he was to spend a lot of his time – particularly in his later years – countering accusations that were probably well founded, but that lacked that final essential ingredient: proof. It helped, of course, that much of what he had achieved came with the backing of the French (and for some time, the South African) intelligence establishments.

At the end of the day, all involved always got their requisite pound of flesh…

On the military side in the Comoros, it was all fairly straight forward. The SADF paid something like US$6 million a year towards the GP budget. That meant that cooperation – and those bits of military intrigue in Africa in which the SADF was involved – invariably went off reasonably well. There was the occasional glitch, but that was rare, because the colonel was very much of a "hands-on" person. In a nutshell, he knew and understood Africa.

At one stage, says Ferreira, the GP had a group of Recces – under the command of a commandant (lieutenant-colonel today) – teaching the GP Special Forces a few unconventional tricks. At the end of the course, several South African generals and other senior ranks visited the Comoros to attend the graduation ceremony.

Then, in order to deflect some of the attention from himself – there were strings of journalists and other spooky characters constantly visiting the islands – he announced his retirement and appointed his right-hand man, Dominique Malacrino, alias Commandant Marques, as head of the GP. About then things started to become a little uncertain.

Nominally Denard was still in full charge of the military and he continued to enjoy great political influence but there were people – both locals and foreigners – who wanted him ousted. Also, with changes of government in France, some of his supporters either moved on or retired and there was no question that the New Guard was both suspicious and resentful of this non-politically correct individual who, after all, was still categorized as a mercenary.

In a bid to make his case more legitimate, Denard the soldier and Comorian political leader converted to Islam. Clearly, it was the sensible thing to do since the island group was preponderantly Islamic. He assumed the name of Saïd Mustapha Mahdjoub and it was then that he took a local wife, who was at his side at all public events.

Meantime, France began to put pressure on the South African Government to force the Frenchman and his mercenaries out of the Comoros. What was more, they had the political and military clout to do so, since many of the aircraft in the South African Air Force – both helicopters and jet fighters – had come from France.

Ferreira: "The crunch came when the South African diplomatic representative in Moroni, a man by the name of Roger, called a press conference. The order had come from 'Pik' Botha, the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, to publically denounce Denard and demand not only his immediate departure but also his entire largely white foreign contingent of mercenaries.

"Obviously there were some serious ructions in Pretoria. It rankled at all levels that Botha had taken things upon himself and acted without consulting the South African Defence Force. We were aware that our military people did not approve and, as a consequence, there was a lot of friction.

"Undeterred, Denard immediately retaliated and had the South African representative expelled from the country. Shortly afterwards a new man was appointed in the Moroni post, but then things went even more sour when a South African citizen who had been working for the Southern Sun Hotel conglomerate on the islands was arrested by a bunch of GP soldiers at the airport for taking photographs. He too, was deported back to South Africa.

"Not long afterwards, a flash signal came through from Pretoria. A Lear Jet was about to land on the Comoros. On board, it said, was the top structure of the South African Defence Force.

"The South African top military brass – including the Chief of Staff Intelligence, Lieutenant General *Wit Kop* Badenhorst – spent several days cloistered in meetings with Colonel Denard. Clearly, He was told that severe political pressure was being exerted on them for he and his men quit the islands.

"Not long after this high level group had returned to Pretoria, we received an ultra-secret signal from Pretoria that our military liaison officer had to

personally hand-deliver to the colonel. Part of the bad news for Denard was that his budget was being cut by 50 percent for the following year."

By now, Denard was facing pressure from all quarters, including from certain indigenous factions within the Comoros itself. Life was being made increasingly difficult for the man and Denard was literally fighting for his survival as well as for any future role that the GP might have on the archipelago.

The next phase, according to Manuel Ferreira, was seminal to Denard's future role on the islands.

He tells us of "Foxtrot," also French and a captain in the *Garde Présidentielle*. Additionally, he was in charge of all matters relating to security of the president and of his personal bodyguards. "Foxtrot" lived right next to the Presidential Palace in Moroni.

"Foxtrot' was actually a very pleasant chap and mixed a lot with us South Africans. He'd spend most of his spare time either playing chess with the guys or attending our braais.



Main entrance to Colonel Denard's *Garde Presidentielle* military headquarters at Kandani (Photo: Vitor Mosca) and left, Colonel Denard formally introduces outgoing CSI Admiral Dries Putter and new CSI Lt-Gen 'Witkop' Badenhorst to GP officers. (Photo: Capt H – courtesy of Manuel Ferreira)

"As usual, that particular Saturday night, 'Foxtrot' spent several hours at the base with us. As he was leaving, I asked whether he would be around the next day. 'No, not tomorrow,' he answered, explaining that his men would be, as he phrased it, 'conducting night exercises.' This was his exact answer.

"I confess that nothing seemed peculiar about his retort. After the recent departure of the South African Recces, night exercises by the GP sounded genuine. In fact, it was something we might have expected.

"Then, that next evening, Sunday night, just before I went to bed, all hell seemed to be breaking out from the direction of the presidential palace. There

was a lot of shooting and we could see tracers arching across the sky from Moroni. I said something to my comrades that it was probably ‘Foxtrot’ and his night exercises.”

“The next morning, as usual, I was the first up in the Interception Operations centre. As I entered, I heard our military liaison officer calling me frantically over the radio from his home, outside Moroni: ‘Manuel, nobody is to leave the base, the president was killed last night !’

“Bob Denard acted with alacrity. Obviously disconcerted, he accused the Comorian National Army of launching an attack on the presidential compound. Moreover, he wasn’t wrong because the *Forces Armées Comoriennes* and its chief, Commandant Ahmed Mohammed, had staged a coup and ended up murdering the president. He immediately dissolved the national army and had some of its officers arrested.

“That was when France gave Denard and his men an ultimatum: they were to leave the Comores with immediate effect.

“Of course, the colonel refused. His immediate reaction was to promise to ‘fight back on to the last man.’ That was his view of retaliation against a possible sea and airborne invasion by the French.

“From then on, every single day, we were to see French warships patrolling along the horizon off Moroni. There were also regular French reconnaissance flights over Grande Comore, usually at very high altitudes. GP troops were deployed at all strategic points along the coast and artillery guns were positioned in Moroni itself, facing the sea. The colonel was taking the threat very seriously indeed, but he was obviously aware that this was not something that happened overnight. The French had substantial resources to hand and they had to take a while to muster… most of it had come from the island of Réunion, which remains staunchly under the tricolor. A series of discussions followed, but Denard was adamant. He was not going to surrender.

“Meantime, the order came from Pretoria that all SADF personnel deployed with the GP were to break off all contact with Denard’s people. We were prohibited from entering their main barracks or to eat at their officers’ mess, something that had been the norm for many years. Even our army medical doctor officer who operated out of the main GP barracks was ordered to vacate that position.

“Following Pretoria having made its decision to break with Denard – it

was all ‘Pik’ Botha’s doing, of course – I was asked by our Military Liaison officer to go to the main GP barracks and pick up 30 crates of beer that we had ordered a while back… they had already been paid for. Because nobody else had the courage to show up, I took the initiative to fetch it all. But then, while loading the crates, my comrade Daniel, a veteran French mercenary who was on the Comoros with the colonel from Day One, came closer. He never said a word, but just gave me a filthy look, which, I suppose, said it all.

“You could hardly miss the resentment. We South Africans had shafted a close friend and ally. And that, after all the colonel and his men had done in the interests of the Republic… as one of them phrased it: ‘now that we need you more than ever, you desert us.’

“For the first time ever in my life, as a solid South African patriot, I was seriously embarrassed.

“It was the same old story of treachery on the orders of foreign powers. Pretoria had dropped its old friend in the *dwang*, very much as it had done with the whites in Angola and Mozambique who had asked Pretoria to give them a hand and declare a unilateral declaration of independence in 1975. The same happened soon afterwards with the Rhodesians. They too were dropped in at the deep end on Washington’s orders. Now it was Denard’s turn…

“Although we did halt all contact with the GP, Colonel Denard kept up his side of the bargain until the end. His military guards remained on duty at our base to the end, with our rations delivered daily from the GP mess.”

The rest is history. French forces invaded, not in Moroni, but at the airport, with the deployment of crack Paras brought in by helicopter. These troops then advanced towards Moroni and the GP barracks. After brief discussions and to avoid a possible bloodbath, the French agreed that Denard did not need to surrender and could vacate the islands in a dignified manner with his white officers in tow. It was done with customary French *savoir-faire*; gentlemen’s agreements all round…

Denard then handed his Comorian forces over to the French commander at the airport, after a final review of his loyal troops. He and his men were allowed to board a commercial SafAir C-130 aircraft, fully armed and in uniform. Once airborne and on their way to Waterkloof Air Force Base on the outskirts of Pretoria, they removed their fatigues and handed their weapons over to the South African crew.

Years later, in 1995, Denard was still man enough to show the world his true caliber. He invaded the Comoros once more, took over in a couple of days and freed some of his ex-GP soldiers who had been jailed by the new order. He was totally loyal to his troops and they adored him.

The French wasted little time on this occasion and again invaded the island, arrested the colonel and escorted him back to France. There he was charged with the murder of President Abdallah Abdermane. When the matter eventually came to trial, Denard claimed that a faked coup was undertaken by the GP that night so that this could be blamed on the regular army, which would then be forcibly disarmed. It had all been carefully planned beforehand, he told the judges. He further maintained that President Abdermane had actually agreed to the faked coup and, at 0010 hours on 26 November, had signed the order to disarm the regular army. Seconds later, he lay dead in his pajamas. The simulated coup had gone terribly wrong, Denard claimed.

While the court maintained that it could not believe this version of events that led to the death of a serving president, Denard and his deputy Marques were acquitted. The prosecution had failed to prove its case, the reason being that a key witness, Manuel Ferreira's good old friend and comrade "Foxtrot," could not be traced…

As Ferreira wrote afterwards to his colonel: "Bob, I don't give a shit how the President died. The fact is that only you, Marques and 'Foxtrot' were privy to exactly what happened that night. All three of you were in his room when he was shot. You and Commandant Marques were acquitted and that's all that matters to me.

"Moreover, you and your highly disciplined GP created the longest period of peace for the islands, during which time you oversaw the establishment of democratic institutions. You also helped develop the country's economic infrastructure, facilitated the creation of companies and jobs, promoted rural development, encouraged the building of roads and propelled the improvement of humanitarian conditions in a world where people had suffered relentlessly under a succession of rulers with little notion of transparent, compassionate governance…

"I salute you, *Mon colonel*…"

LAST WORDS

Michel Rocard, French Prime Minister from 1988 to 1991 under President Mitterrand, admitted in Washington in January 2000 that Colonel Bob Denard had been in a "relationship" with the DGSE, the French External Security Agency. He disclosed that there was complicity between the French State and the plot to overthrow President Abdallah.

Five days before his assassination in November 1989, President Abdallah had sent a letter to Mitterrand, informing him that he had raised the question of the Comorian island of Mayotte in a memorandum to Javier Perez de Cuellar, the then United Nations Secretary-General.

Mayotte was then – and is still – the only part of the Comorian archipelago that remains under French control, an issue consistently and vehemently contested by all governments of the independent Comores ever since the island group achieved independence from France. It continues to be a matter that is both emotional and contentious among the majority of Comorians, including quite a few who continue to live on the twin islands that make up French-dependent Mayotte.

A final note too, from Manuel Ferreira, who today lives a quiet but industrious life in the Southern Cape with his family: "After my period of service with the *Garde Présidentielle* came to an end, I went on to serve a few tours with the Zaire Secret Services under President Mobutu Sese Seko."

But that, he says, "is a story for another day…"

1 Mike Hoare's book *Congo Mercenary* has been on the best seller lists for decades.

2 Al J. Venter: *Gunship Ace: The Wars of Neall Ellis, Helicopter Pilot and Mercenary*, Casemate Publishers, United States and Britain (with a South African edition published by Protea Books, Pretoria).

3 Duff Hart-Davis: *The War that Never Was*, Century, London, a division of Random House, 2011.

CHAPTER THREE

PROFILE OF A MERCENARY: COBUS CLAASSENS

It was dark by the time our boat passed the estuary of the Little Scarcies River, about ten minutes chopper flight north of West Africa's Freetown. We'd been patrolling offshore since late afternoon. Though there were several foreign flag fishing boats about that invited attention, Cobus – our skipper – was intent on something else.

He pulled in closer towards the shore. Kortimaw Island's irregular shape loomed out of the gloom, the shoreline offering little more than a black line against a dusky interior even though the moon was half full. In the dark the void seemed absolute and sounds tended confuse.

In the distance we could see a faint, irregular glimmer of lights from one of the mainland villages. None of the villages this far beyond the few vestiges of civilization had power: for light, the people used cutaway cans of palm oil with a wick floating on top.

"Get down," the skipper grunted sharply at one of the gunners who had got up to relieve himself. "You too," Cobus motioned towards me as he scanned the coastline. I had tried to stretch my cramped legs but didn't argue.

Slowly I lowered myself below the gunwale of the wooden sampan – "Pam Pams" in the local lingo – as we chugged northwards towards the Guinea frontier. Five more men on board did the same. All except the Angolan Antonio Viera who sat in the prow and armed with an RPG-7 rocket grenade launcher that he kept out of sight.

Normally, on government sanctioned fisheries control patrols Cobus Claassens deployed his company's customized semi-rigid "raiders" to intercept maritime targets or confront Chinese or Ghanaian fishing boats that trawled illegally in Sierra Leone waters. This time – as he had done a lot

before – he was working at the behest of the fledgling Sierra Leone military government by employing a fairly modest craft that was ubiquitous along this stretch of the coast. Referred to colloquially as the Pam Pam, these boats are sleek and fast.

The bottom line was that a leftover gang of former RUF rebels, notorious for their barbaric amputations and other war crimes had fled the battles around Freetown and was now hiding out in the Yelibuya sound, a dense maze of mangrove swamp, jungle and fetid streams on the border between Sierra Leone and neighboring Guinea. With stolen speedboats, they were attacking the stream of intercoastal vessels, killing passengers and robbing cargo. Pam Pams were a common sight along the West African coastline and could be deceptively large, with a deep hold and long center-line, often carrying as much as 50 tons of cargo. In fact, they formed the backbone of the intercoastal trade along this stretch of the West African coast.



Cobus Claassens (left) with his old friend and comrade-in-arms the late Fred Marafono, who died following an illness in 2013. Fred, who had fought rebels with his South African buddy in Sierra Leone, had served for many years with great distinction in the British SAS. It is significant that aspects of Claassens' life were featured in the Leonard deCaprio film Blood Diamond. (Photo: Cobus Claassens)

Cobus had one of these built and from the outside it was indistinguishable

from regular craft. In the hold, hidden by the high stern was a far more powerful 250 hp outboard motor, enabling the craft to move at a good rate of knots. He had also constructed a revetment with sandbags, neatly hidden by the gunwales and covered with a tattered tarpaulin. Inside was concealed a well-drilled team of his men, mostly Sierra Leone sailors reinforced by some of his more experienced former mercenary buddies.

Moments later Cobus – almost invisible against the sea in his black combat battle jacket which held half-a-dozen AK-47 magazines in pouches down the front – cut the engine. We listened intently as we peered out into the dark.

Lying five or six hundred yards offshore, the litany that reached out from there was both intrusive and diverse. In the distance a woman called. From far away, somewhere in the interior, another answered, her voice drowned by the jarring screech of some jungle animal. A desperate cry of pain ? Who could tell ?

To the south of us – from where we had just come – we picked up the steady chug of a diesel: probably one of the trawlers we had slid past earlier. It was headed for Freetown.

Cobus restarted our engine and moved our boat closer inshore. His intention – as he'd explained earlier – was to make us only vaguely visible to pirates lurking in hidden coves or swamps and who might be interested in an "unarmed" boat, perhaps heading to a neighboring country. In a word, we'd set ourselves up to be plundered. The perception, he explained, was that we possibly had something of value onboard.

"We have to make the objective desirable enough for them to come for us," he added. I was already aware that several Pam Pams had been robbed in recent months and Cobus' company, Freetown-based Southern Cross Security had been tasked by the Sierra Leone government to try to put a stop to this open-water piracy.

One of the problems we faced was while almost everybody in the region could live with being mugged or robbed on occasion, these maritime perpetrators were ruthless. They not only took everything, but quite often killed all those onboard. The attackers were invariably well armed with AKs and the occasional RPG-7.

The third time that Cobus cut his engine there was no mistaking the sound of another outboard. It was heading straight at us. For a few moments we

were surprised that the intruder had got so close and in such a short time. By then it barely 300 yards away and heading our way at rate of knots.

Suddenly a string of tracer fire arched over our heads. Instinctively we ducked. Earlier survivors of these attacks had reported a similar pattern: the pirates fired tracers to initiate the contact in order to stop the target boat.

By now Cobus had cut his engine, but still, facing incoming fire, he said nothing. I watched as he slowly sat back on the gunwale and offered us a hardly discernible nod in the bad light. It was his signal to get ready.

The drill that followed had been rehearsed for days. Because the enemy was unlikely to have powerful lights – early survivors had spoken about a flashlight or two – everybody on the boat except Cobus (with one arm cradling his weapon and the other on the tiller) and Viera in the bow – would stay low. The signal to get involved would be Cobus lifting his AK to his shoulder and by then, it was anticipated, the other boat would be about 50 yards away.

Once Cobus and Viera had fired, we would all open up. One of the men amidships would bring a British-made .762 mm GPMG to bear.

And that's what took place moments later. Viera – with six more rocket-propelled grenades strapped to his chest – let rip, followed by the others. The rocket hit the attackers just ahead of their engine followed by a powerful secondary explosion when the raider's fuel tank took a hit.

Of the six or seven men onboard the boat that had fired first, there was only one survivor. Wounded, he was pulled from the water. There might have been others, but one of the men said afterwards that in the reflected light from the flames, he'd spotted a fin before the sea swallowed the rest of the detritus.

We discussed the attack later and it obvious the dice had fallen our way. But, as Cobus commented, it could easily have gone the other way.

As a youngster, Cobus grew up on an African farm, passed matric and went straight into the South African Army. A fast-moving career saw him become one of the youngest ever battalion commanders, commanding the illustrious 1st Parachute Battalion in his last year of service. He resigned his commission and went on to pursue a career in the private security business.

His time with the army was notable because by then the "Border War" was in full swing. During cross-border operations into Angola that included operation Modular and Hooper, he was involved in numerous actions against

the Angolan army, by then powerfully backed by Cuban and Soviet forces, which was one of the reasons why he was headhunted by the private military group Executive Outcomes to fight rebels in Sierra Leone. He was acknowledged as an expert in the conduct of “Fireforce Operations” and many of the events of that period are to be found elsewhere in this book.

After more adventures and than he sometimes cares to remember, he is today a director and shareholder in a respected global risk management firm with a Fortune 500 client list and several philanthropic interests. He focuses in doing business in Africa and is a firm believer and supporter of Africa as the continent where, in spite of its troubles, has a future that lies in business and commerce.

“Trouble is, the nearest I get to any kind of excitement these days is the golf course… but I do own a half-share in a US Navy coastguard cutter that operates out of Mombasa, and we have had some interesting forays with her in Somali waters…”

What he does stress is that wherever he did, he always ensured that he and his men occupied the moral high ground. “We never conducted mercenary actions in the narrowest sense of the word… we were always contracted by legitimate and democratically elected governments and we were held totally accountable by the International Human Rights Tribunal.

“They investigated us extensively and finally gave us a hundred percent ‘clean bill of health’.”

As a military correspondent covering hostilities in West Africa, I spent a short while with Cobus Claassens while in Sierra Leone. One of the operations involved talking a rebel base a few hours trudge through the kind of jungle country that surrounds the diamond fields in the east of the country. A photo of Cobus and the author shortly after that attack can be seen on the back cover.



Mercenary “Flying Column” headed towards the diamond fields in Sierra Leone. The only piece of armor that the unit had for support against ambushes and attacks was an antiquated Soviet BMP-2. (Photo: Cobus Claassens)

By then the EO combat contingent had been split into two units. The first – with Soviet-era BMP infantry fighting vehicles and Land Rovers in tow– was designated the Mobile Force. The other, under Cobus’s command – and with chopper gunship support – was Fire Force. The mercenaries went on to fight like this until the Kono diamond fields were finally recaptured from the enemy.

By the time I got there, sending dispatches to Britain’s Jane’s Information Group, the two units had been amalgamated under the overall command of that veteran of numerous mercenary campaigns, Roelf van Heerden, with Cobus designated tactical commander on the ground.

He then moved Fire Force to a new operational base on the outskirts of Freetown and the merc ranks were swollen by a bunch of new arrivals from Angola. More battles followed, among them some of the toughest he’d experienced. Cobus was wounded in one particularly bloody fray and received Executive Outcomes “Honor Dagger”, the company’s highest award, of which only three were ever presented to outstanding combatants.

Politics forced Executive Outcomes out of Sierra Leone not long afterwards, but Cobus stayed on and went on to work with Lifeguard, a commercial private security firm. For a while he worked security at the Rutile Mine, took over at Bumbuna when Pine Pienaar – a fellow field-commander

– was assassinated by one of his own men and was appointed the firm's general manager in the Sierra Leone capital city.

"I traded diamonds in Guinea for awhile and got recruited by a US firm in an American government contract. This resulted in my operating – sometimes in dangerous circumstances – in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

"Most of that will have to remain classified, but it did involve Nic du Toit – a truly good man who I count lucky to have as a friend and who survived years in Equatorial Guinea's notorious Black Beach Prison after the aborted attempt to overthrow that government, an operation that also involved Mark Thatcher, son of the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher."

Also linked to this period of his life was the investigation and incarceration of former Liberian President Charles Taylor, the tyrant who is today a permanent guest of the European prisons system for human rights transgressions.

Cobus then formed his own security firm Southern Cross, this time with a Sierra Leone partner. Under his control, it became the largest commercial security entity in the country, after which it was sold to the international security combine G4S, became their local partner for a couple of years and then divested himself of that interest before moving on.

What is notable is that apart from his earlier operations – some of which can best be described as shadowy – Cobus Claassens, as he likes to put it – went "totally legitimate". He ended up with quite a few hefty clients that that he has served well over the years, including the United Nations, WFP, the International Committee of the Red Cross as well as numerous NGOs and government agencies.

"Fact is, I was on a totally new track and simply couldn't get involved in any of the old ways anymore. The only thing that was always exiting was my maritime anti-poaching and anti-piracy set-up… that could sometimes be quite hairy.

"After selling Southern Cross, I became what is known in this business, a 'Journeyman Security Consultant', working hard at being a family man but still accepting contracts in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Thailand, Europe, Lebanon, Israel and some other interesting places. This was mostly protection work, but included a few other facets as well as training, and that made it all worthwhile.

"For a while I again got myself involved in anti-poaching, where we made

a series for the History Channel called *Shadow Force*."

What Cobus didn't tell me, and which I gathered from some of my other soldier of fortune pals, was that one of the main characters in the Ed Zwick blockbuster film *Blood Diamond* was based on the portion of Cobus' life as a mercenary combatant in Sierra Leone.

It says a lot that he was involved in the movie and in the process, worked with Leonard DiCaprio.

CHAPTER FOUR

CUBAN MERCENARIES IN THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY'S AIR WAR IN THE CONGO

Not many people are aware that for many years, Washington was directly involved in the Congo's civil wars. The CIA even hired a bunch of expatriate Cubans living in Miami to fight the rebels opposed to Mobuto Sese Seko's Kinshasa government. They flew them to Africa and gave them the planes with which to do the job, including a bunch of T-6 Harvard trainers. Leif Hellström made an extensive study of these events and here he provides the gist of it…

Above the Ituri rain forest, North-east Congo: Saturday 29 May 1965

It was an uneventful flight until the American-build T-28 Trojan aircraft piloted by a Belgian in the employ of the CIA ran out of fuel.

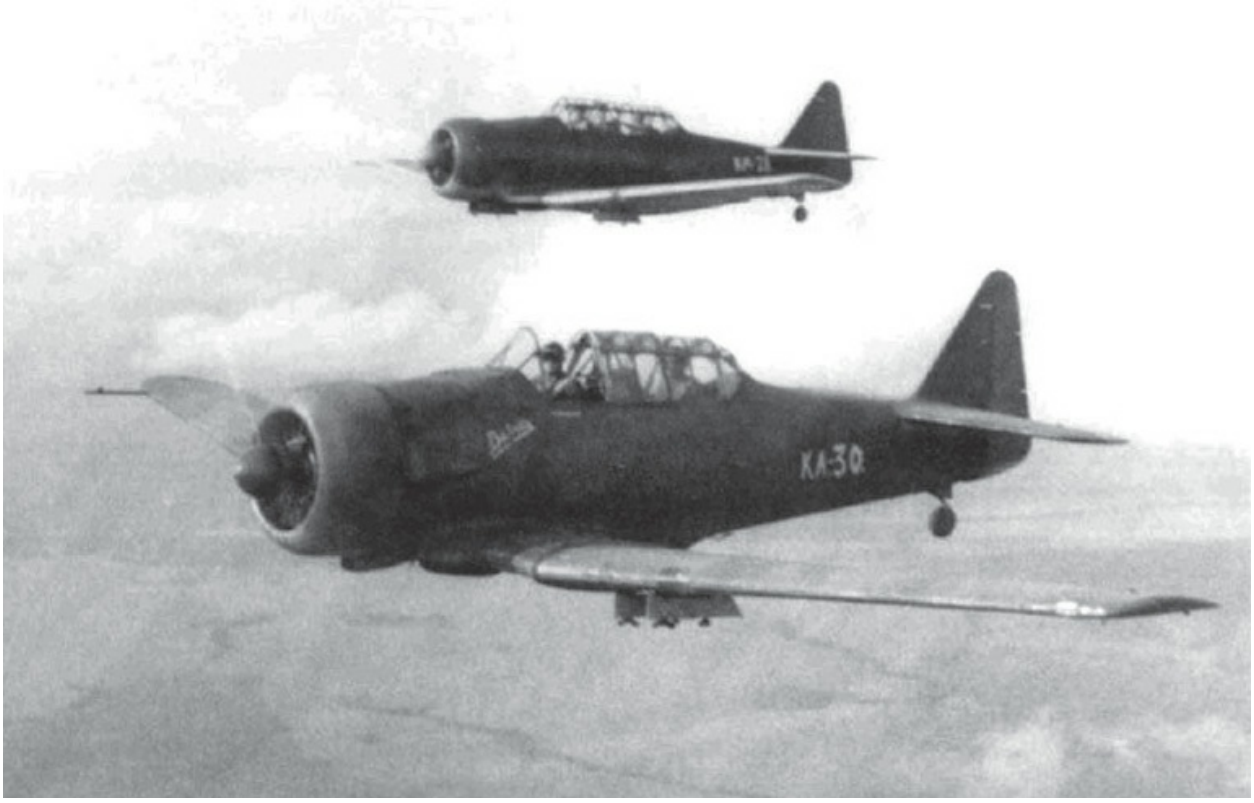
Not dissimilar to the early T-6s or Harvards flown by the South African Air Force as trainers for many years, the T-28 was designed for use in counterinsurgency roles in Vietnam. This particular aircraft – one of two in the air over some of Africa's almost impenetrable rain forests – was on an operational mission in the Congo.

The pilot's wingman, Luis De la Guardia, had switched radio channels to talk to base operations at Paulis airfield (Osiro today, way east of present-day

Kisangani on the road to Bunia) to tell them that his flight was in trouble. When he switched back there was no reply from his flight leader, only static.

Bracco must already have bailed out, he decided. His own fuel warning light had been on for some time and he knew the engine of the T-28 would quit within minutes. There was no chance of reaching any landing ground before then and there was no question: he was going down in the jungle.

Earlier that afternoon it had started off as a routine mission. A message had come in that a detachment of government troops was in trouble and "Mish" Mishou, the CIA air operations officer at their field, dispatched the two T-28s to give support. He told the pilots that their underwing rockets and machine guns would provide adequate support.



Two mercenary flown T-6 aircraft of the Katangese Air Force on a mission in the autumn of 1962. These were the aircraft the Congolese government and the United Nations were so worried about. (Photo: via Leon Libert)

The lead aircraft was flown by Roger Bracco, a veteran Belgian mercenary who had served in the Katangan Air Force against the United Nations. His wingman was De la Guardia, a Cuban pilot recently arrived from Miami.

They had flown to Titule, a mission station some 200 miles north of Stanleyville – Kisangani today – where a squad of about 50 troops led by three Belgian officers of the 6th Commando was pinned down by rebel mortar fire. The Belgian mercenaries had been hired to provide leadership and "stiffening" to the local soldiers.

"It shouldn't have been any problem," De la Guardia recalled. Their orders were to fly to Titule, make radio contact with their ground forces, do what was needed and return to base. It should have been a cakewalk, but as it turned out, it wasn't.

As it happened, one of the officers taking fire on the ground from the rebels was a personal friend of Bracco. So they started talking and Bracco was asked to do this and then that, and so it went on.

The two aircraft fired their rockets at enemy positions pinpointed from the ground and then things would go quiet. But shortly afterwards the unit on the ground started getting mortared again, so they had to go in again and repeat the process. Clearly, the rockets weren't having the hoped-for effect.



Washington's Central Intelligence Agency supplied Mobutu Sese Seko with a number of World War II-vintage T-28 Trojans (similar to the Harvards flown by the SAAF) for use in ground attack roles, and right, a group of French mercenaries in the Congo. (Photos courtesy of Leif Hellström collection)

The wingman did his best to give Bracco protection. In stages, he was flying low trying to pinpoint enemy positions and from where the mortars

were being fired. At other times he stayed high, cruising around at about 3,500 ft, to see whether other ground forces were shooting at the two aircraft.

"Of course the rebels knew exactly what we were doing," he declared afterwards. "They saw the other airplane loitering above and said, 'Don't make any smoke, because if you do that guy up there is going to come right down on us !' "

The two planes loitered a while longer, all the while trying to draw out the rebels. By now, De la Guardia was getting worried about fuel and told Bracco it was time to go.

"Yeah, yeah… five more minutes !" the other man replied.

"OK, five more minutes. We talked to the people on the ground and they asked us to let go everything we had and they would use that opportunity to move out… it was about 16:30 in the afternoon with another 90 minutes or so to go before dark."

By now, De la Guardia was worried. "Bracco, it is time to go ! Time to go !" he urged over his radio, his voice sounding stressed.

"OK, OK, we are going," was Bracco's reply. He then suggested that they fire all their rockets first and when that was done, he came on the air again and said they still had their machine guns.

"OK," he told De la Guardia, "let go with the machine guns while these guys move out."

But then, quite unexpectedly while making the final pass, De la Guardia said that he'd been hit by ground fire. "Hey, Bracco ! Something hit me… I can see an opening, a tear of some kind on top of the wing."

Bracco acknowledged and moved towards and below his wingman's aircraft. Once underneath he said: "All right, yeah, you got a hit. It doesn't look too bad, you're just spilling a little bit of fuel."

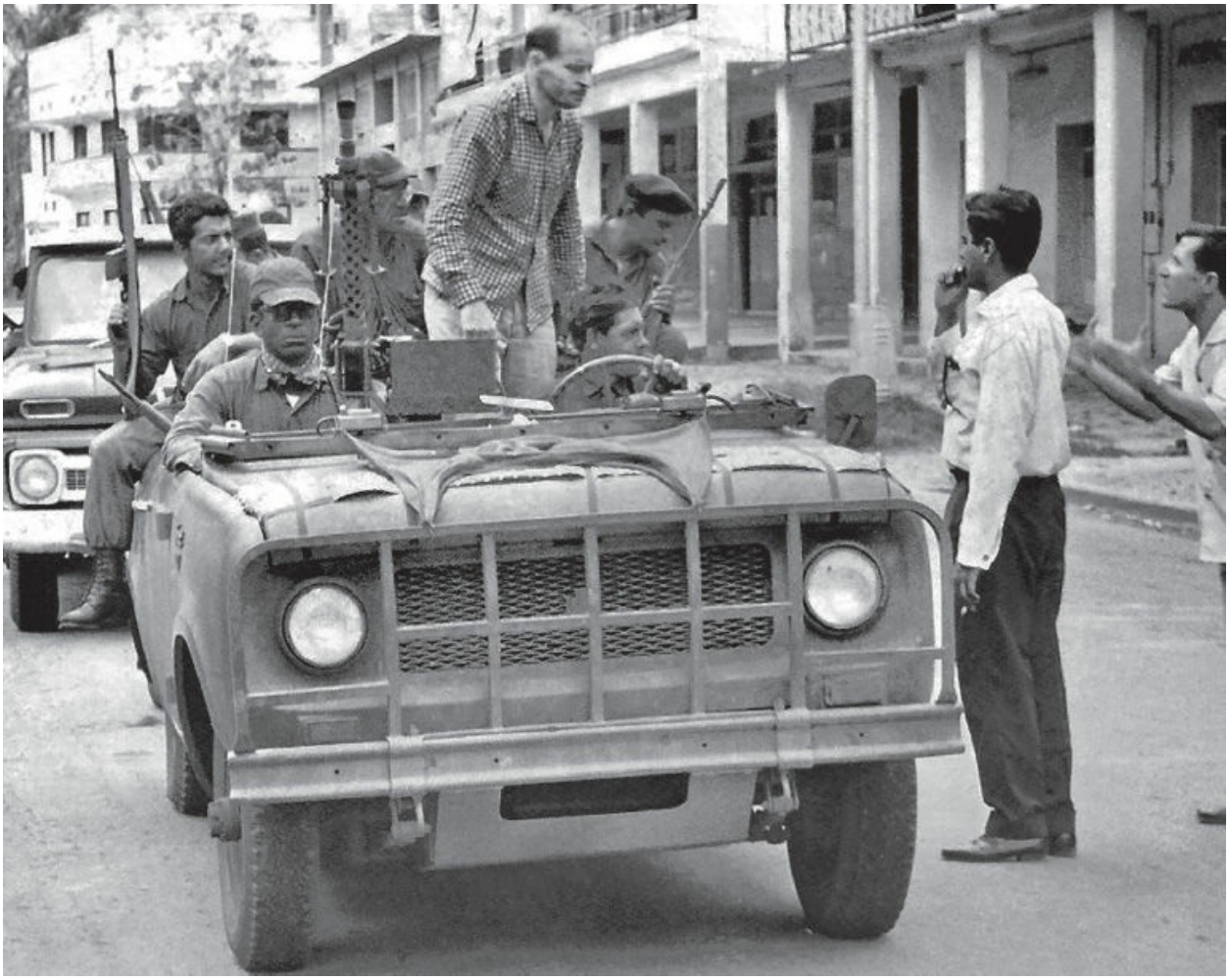
De la Guardia didn't have to be told that the T-28 fuel tanks were like rubberized cells and that if they were punctured by ground fire, they automatically sealed themselves to minimize fuel loss. But still, it was worrying, De la Guardia conceded. With that, the two pilots headed home.

But it was too late. On the final track in, the planes ran into a succession of those thunderstorms that only the Congo can generate. That forced a detour, and by the time they were 50 miles from base it was obvious that they were

not going to make it.

Mishou's last words to the pilots from the base had been something about coming for them first thing in the morning. When his engine started coughing, De la Guardia bailed out.

"I jumped from the left side, going out head first. It was already pitch-black, right there, but I still spotted the beacon on top of the vertical fin missing me by about three yards… lucky I wasn't hit.



Cuban pilots are stopped at a road block in Stanleyville (Kisangani today) after that city had been liberated from the Simba rebels. Most of these aviators had been recruited by the CIA in Miami. (Photo: courtesy of the Leif Hellström collection)

"On clearing the plane, I started pulling on my D-ring and it seemed ages before it finally opened. You pull and you pull some more, and then you ask yourself, where the hell is the parachute ? It takes a few seconds.

"Since I had emerged head first from the aircraft, I flipped when the

parachute opened. Then quite unexpectedly, the harness pulled taut against the Uzi cradled on my chest and almost broke a rib. I did see a flash somewhere ahead of me, but at some distance. It could have been something else, but I think it was when the aircraft impacted the ground.

“As I was coming down in the parachute, I looked down. That was when I saw several lightning strikes three to five miles away illuminate the entire area around me.

“I looked down and all I could see was jungle… a pea-green soup of a tropical forest that even in that bad light seemed to go on forever.”

Moments later the jungle rushed up towards the pilot and he impacted, going into the heavy foliage at an angle and crashing through the tree-tops before his parachute snagged. The back of De la Guardia’s helmet collided with a branch, hard enough to crack the tough plastic. Then, total silence.

After a few moments the pilot regained his bearings. Slowly he began he to take stock. He felt around his body and though there were bruises galore, nothing seemed seriously injured. Meantime, he found himself hanging yards above the ground, his parachute canopy stuck on a protruding branch of the trees. He could do nothing as the wind rustled the branches around him and rain dripped down onto his helmet.

Minutes later it was completely dark and now impossible to see the ground. Which was when the thought hit him: how the hell was he going to get himself out of that mess and get down unharmed ?

Here he was, a young Cuban student and sometime crop duster, hanging from a 90 ft forest giant in an African jungle. He was familiar enough with the flight plan they’d logged earlier to be aware that he was far behind enemy lines. Were he to be detected, they would kill him. Simple as that, only it wouldn’t be quick. In Africa’s remote regions, it never is.

Totally on his own, lonely and, for the first time, terrified, he knew that there was absolutely nothing he could do until it got light again. For a while he thought about family and friends.

The night passed slowly and more than once he asked himself what he was doing there, how he got there and why the hell he got involved ?

And how had the CIA ended up hiring him to go to the Congo ?

In 1966, the *New York Times* published an article where it claimed that the Central Intelligence Agency had put an “instant air force” into the Congo a

couple of years previously. This was done to support the operations of mercenary troops hired by the Congolese Government to fight a rebellion.

By then America was openly supporting the Congolese Government militarily, politically and economically and it was fairly common knowledge that the CIA was involved in various ways. What was not common knowledge at the time was that Washington's paramilitary support of the Congolese had actually started long before the rebellion broke out in 1964, and that it was initially intended for entirely different purposes. The CIA had already sent an air unit to the Congo in 1962 to help support the Congolese government against a rather modest military threat that had turned into a grave political problem for Cyril Adoula, the prime minister of that period.

In a remarkable book by Leif Hellström – a Swedish historian of considerable note – titled *The Instant Air Force: The Creation of the CIA's Air Unit in the Congo*, 1962, he tells us that a significant problem for the Congolese Central Government in the early days was that it lacked air power.

During the colonial period the Belgians operated a small force of transport aircraft and helicopters in their Congo, but most of these, as well as all their Belgian pilots, had been transferred to Katanga soon after independence.

The Congolese made some effort to build up an air force but none of it led to anything and by the autumn of 1962 there was not a single pilot, Congolese or otherwise, in the *Force Aérienne Congolaise* (FAC), or Congolese Air Force. This military arm had bought six ex-Belgian T-6 Harvard trainer aircraft in mid-1962, which could potentially be used for air support missions, but only if pilots and the requisite armaments could be acquired. And therein lay the rub, because on independence from Belgium in 1960, the Congo – a country almost as large as France, Germany and Spain together – had only six university graduates. It had no aviators… not even a single pupil pilot.

Meanwhile, in the secessionist south, the Katangan Air Force (*Aviation Katangaise*, which abbreviated to Avikat) was being steadily built up again, having been destroyed by the United Nations during fighting in 1961.

By late September of that year the Avikat had ten T-6 aircraft, the same type as those bought by the FAC. But unlike the Central Government, the Katangans had hired mercenary pilots for their aircraft and had armaments in abundance, thanks in large part to Belgian mining interests that wished the dissident state to remain distant from the country's Central Government in Leopoldville, soon to change its name to Kinshasa.

This tiny air force soon began flying ground attack missions in northern Katanga in support of the Katangan military operations against dissidents and supporters of the Central Government.

Since it was in the interests of the Congolese Central Government to be able to provide its ground troops with effective air support, it needed to find more aircraft or at least enough pilots to man its planes. Moreover, it needed to do so quickly. At about this point, the Americans stepped up to the plate, in part to stymie Soviet efforts at destabilizing an entire region that stretched all the way across the African continent.

One needs to bear in mind as well that Portugal was currently fighting a series of major insurrections in Angola and Mozambique, with the majority of the rebels ranged against Lisbon being funded and supported by Moscow. In this regard the Congo was also involved and obviously, this alarmed some American strategists. That was when somebody in Washington emerged with the idea that the best alternative would be to allow surrogate forces into the fray that were under total American control.



Duffy (left) with the aircrew of one of the American bombers provided by the CIA to fight Simba rebels in the north-east of the country. (Photo: Peter Duffy)

If the US Government was to assist the Congolese Government in countering the Katangan air threat, there were a number of ways of going about it.

The two main alternatives for the Americans were themselves to give the assistance needed, or get someone else to provide it. The latter option had the advantage of reducing the risk of the United States being accused of meddling in Congolese politics. In theory, the Americans might have attempted to persuade one of their allies, or some neutral country in Africa or elsewhere, to provide the Congolese with unilateral assistance.

However, even ignoring all the possible practical and political complications that could have arisen from such a move, it would likely have been difficult to find any country willing to stick its neck out in this way, especially in an extremely volatile Africa.

In practice, this option was not even seriously considered. (However, there were discussions in 1962 about Italian involvement in the setting up of a military flying school in the Congo, but this was of course a much more long-term project.) Another potential possible route was to involve the United Nations, already heavily committed to Congolese security. The consensus at the time was that the UN had enough to worry about without adding to its problems.

If the US Government decided to go ahead on its own, the obvious solution would be to officially send in American military forces, which would be coordinated with the Congolese at a high level. Operationally, this move had several advantages; politically there were numerous risks.

Another possible solution might have been to use a force which *de facto* was under US control, but not obviously so. And this is where the Central Intelligence Agency entered the picture.

By 1962 the CIA had gained considerable experience in how to organize, equip and run small air forces in remote corners of the globe. One of the immediate spin-offs from the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs debacle was that a cadre of expatriate Cuban pilots was now available in the USA, already with solid experience of CIA procedures. Paramilitary operations had formed an important part of the CIA's activities for many years and Langley already had a cadre of several hundred people who carried out planning and training for clandestine operations. Additional personnel were hired as needed, either on loan from the US military or from the "free market" in the USA or abroad: *ergo* mercenaries.

Having made its decision to help, and as part of an American support program for the Congo government, a military advisory team travelled to the Congolese capital in June 1962. It published a report a month later, which noted – much like the British and the UN also did around this time – that there were grave problems in many parts of the embattled country. It went on to suggest various options, including the military one.

As for the future, it was stated that:

- Development of such an organization would necessitate outside training and material assistance over a period of time.
- Until the indigenous personnel could be trained and a Congolese unit organized, some arrangement would have to be made for utilization of the available aircraft and facilities to meet the Congo's operational needs.

At this stage, mid-1962, the US Government was still reluctant to get directly militarily involved in the Congo, the idea being that a peaceful solution to the Congo crisis might arise. Whoever was making these deductions obviously had very little experience either of Africa or African politics generally. Still, efforts continued to be directed at supporting United Nations mediating initiatives, but at somebody's insistence, a token shipment of jeeps, radios and various other items was put together and delivered to the Congolese Army a few weeks later.

By now the Congo Government had taken delivery of the first batch of its new T-6 Harvard trainer/ground support aircraft and immediately turned to the US for help. The American ambassador reported in late August 1962 that he had met with Congolese Prime Minister Adoula, who was happy about the arrival of the aircraft but who now insisted on help with finding pilots to fly the planes. Ostensibly, the ambassador remained non-committal.

A few days later he did send a reminder to Washington that Premier Adoula now had six aircraft but still no pilots.

"He may be tempted to hire no-good roustabouts who might be willing to take aggressive initiative," formed part of the message. Weeks later the ambassador made his point again.

For at least a fortnight during this critical time frame Adoula had on his desk a draft contract offered by an obscure company on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean called Air Panama. He was also advised that there was a real possibility that mercenary pilots might be hired for combat, as opposed to instruction. If this happened, warned the American ambassador, "the effect on national reconciliation plan would be adverse."

Air Panama (or *Aerovias Panama* SA, to give the firm its correct name), despite its name, was a relatively small airline in Miami, Florida. It already had a role flying charters for the UN in the Congo and was now trying to get a contract with the Congolese Government.

There was talk at this point of Air Panama providing training for the FAC, presumably including support for its T-6s and the inclusion of exiled Cuban pilots. The US Government looked favorably on Air Panama's proposal and, in return, Air Panama's management was willing to assist the US Government. By mid-September 1962, the CIA director reported that the manager of Air Panama had visited his offices "and volunteered any use of his facilities we need." Whether Langley ever took him up on the offer is not

clear.

Late in September 1962 the UN obtained confirmation that the Katangan Air Force had received a number of T-6 aircraft. This information was forwarded both to Washington and to the Congolese. Clearly, the US Government was becoming increasingly concerned about developments in central Africa, particularly about the deteriorating military situation in the Congo, and especially the prospect of an unrestrained civil war, which suddenly appeared imminent.

A memorandum to President Kennedy from the State Department at this time claimed that “our plans for the Congo are slowly sinking into the African ooze.”

There was no improvement in the situation over the next few weeks and meanwhile the Congolese Government was coming under increasing political pressure from the opposition to do something about Katanga. By early October there were reports that the Soviet Union was preparing to offer military assistance directly to the Congolese Government. Washington needed to act promptly.



United States Air Force markings are removed from a CIA-supplied bomber after arriving in the Congolese capital. (Photo courtesy of Leif Hellström collection)

A month later there were reports of Katangan aircraft carrying out attacks on the Congolese troops in northern Katanga and for the first time the Congolese Government asked Washington directly for help. “I desperately need combat aircraft,” was the gist of it, “since only military pressure would inspire truly conciliatory action by [Katangan President] Tshombe.”

Enter Lawrence (Larry) Devlin, the CIA Chief of Station in the Congo at that time and an old friend of the author. After a lengthy discussion with Devlin about the political situation, Adoula closed the meeting by suggesting that a few good American aircraft would do more to maintain his government in power than anything else the US Government might be able to do.

Devlin, who died recently, disclosed in his book that it was primarily the American ambassador in the Congo who was behind the initiative to hire Cubans. The number of telegrams from the ambassador to Washington concerning aircraft and armaments suggests that he took a very personal interest in the matter.

To find suitable personnel for its new air unit in the Congo, the CIA turned to the group with which it had already had a history of association. Exiled Cubans living in Florida had been involved in numerous clandestine disputes on behalf of their host government, including the nefarious Bay of Pigs fiasco.

In late 1961 Luis Cosme, who had been chief of operations for the CIA air unit in that disaster, went to Washington to get help for the Cuban exile pilots in obtaining valid flying licenses. After some discussions, the CIA agreed to fit the bill and deposited US$25,000 with the Emery Riddle School of Aeronautics in Miami. This was about adequate for the training of 20 pilots, which the “pupils” got free of charge and without strings attached. It was seen as a way to say “thank you” for services rendered in the past.

The CIA also appointed an officer by the name of George (Jerry) Sohl to keep pace with developments and to act as liaison with the Cubans.

This move also slotted in with the CIA’s preference for “foreign” personnel to be hired for this type of operation. Five pilots were initially recruited, most of them from the group training at Emery Riddle and all but one of them, veterans from the Bay of Pigs. The selection was made with the assistance of Cosme, who picked pilots known to him personally, with the contracts being written up at his house. Salary was listed at US$800 a month plus expenses, and the contracts were for a six-month stretch. A single Cuban

aircraft mechanic was also hired.

Officially, the pilots were hired by a medium-sized firm called Caribbean Aeromarine Company, which had been incorporated in Florida in April 1962. Among many other activities listed in its registration, the company was said to "employ personnel and to provide for their training and instruction" in what was termed "the operation, service, maintenance and repair" of aircraft.

In reality, Caribbean Aeromarine's paymaster was Langley and it effectively acted as a front company for the CIA… in business lingo, a so-called "proprietary." These were (and are) companies formed for the purpose of facilitating CIA activities and there were dozens, if not hundreds of them, working in a variety of fields all over the globe.

Some were formed simply to be at hand if their expertise in a particular field was needed and more often than not, their directors and owners were local lawyers. This was apparently the case with Caribbean Aeromarine, since all three members of the board gave the same office building as their official address.

The exact date when the Cubans were hired is not known. Likely it was only two or three weeks before they travelled to the Congo. Prior to setting out for Africa, the crew were given a series of thorough checkouts on the Harvards they were scheduled to fly in Africa by a former United States Navy pilot in Miami. There was also some training in formation flying. No problems were encountered in this preliminary phase because four of the pilots had flown T-6s either in the Cuban Air Force or for the Cuban Navy.

Once in the Congo – with Jerry Sohl accompanying the group as its "manager" – the official line taken was that they were there on contract, working directly for the Congolese Government. Consequently, everybody was given official identity documents issued by the *Armée Nationale Congolaise*. The Cubans all travelled on false passports that indicated they were from Guatemala, the Dominican Republic or elsewhere in the Hispanic world. It didn't work, because in no time at all just about everybody in town knew there was a bunch of Cubans around.

Also, the Congolese tended to refer to them as *les techniciens américains* (American technicians)… implying US origins. So it was no big secret locally that Washington had been involved in the recruitment process.

Curiously, the local Congolese media did not pick up on this anomaly at

the time, though there is little question that they would have been warned off by government goons had they tried to highlight the issue. In those days it wasn't worth your life to try to ignore official warnings and, indeed, half a century later, not very much has changed.

Initially, all the T-6 aircraft were based at the N'Dolo airfield in Leopoldville, where the local military also had its flying school and the Cubans were allocated a small office.

Initially, the aircraft were not armed and for a while, things went slowly. The Cubans flew fairly regularly, usually making formation flights over and around the capital to make sure that everyone knew that the FAC was now "operational." Since the Hispanic crews got paid extra while in the air – so much an hour – they flew almost every day. Also, all their aircraft were in good condition and technical problems were quickly solved by the Cuban chief mechanic and his Congolese assistants.

A few days after their arrival, Sohl and the Cubans were taken to see Colonel Mobutu, the Chief-of-Staff of the ANC. He requested that they immediately fly to Katanga to attack some Katangan troops who were in the process of besieging one of his units. Sohl argued that this was impossible; the planes were not yet fitted with arms, he explained. What he did not tell Mobutu was that his government was still eager to avoid contributing to any escalation of the ongoing military conflict. It was a futile argument because with both the Katangans and the rebels receiving foreign military support, hostilities were escalating anyway.

Finally, somebody in Washington saw the light and the order was given to supply the Cuban aviation contingent with what was termed "a reasonable quantity" of rockets, but only after technical details had been clarified. Once more the situation was allowed to smolder, with nothing positive emerging from the impasse.

By early December the Congo's leader, Premier Adoula, was so discouraged that he claimed his government was in ruins. He also warned the Americans that the security of his country was at stake. He went on to say that "Tshombe was bombarding his troops and villages on a daily basis" and that both the Americans and the United Nations seemed powerless to do anything about it. In particular, it rankled that he had what appeared to be an effective combat wing but wasn't allowed to use it.

So the Cuban pilots stayed "under wraps" and the US continued to delay

the delivery of air-to-ground rockets for their Harvards.

About then, the American ambassador made urgent representations to his bosses and requesting that Washington speed up delivery of the weapons, in large part to counter Soviet offers of military supplies. These were imminent, he declared, and he suggested telling the Congolese that they were on their way. It is worth noting that by now even the American ambassador had become acutely pessimistic about the situation and actually feared a collapse of the government. He said as much in his reports home, which has since been declassified.

In fact, the Congo situation was getting a lot of attention in Washington. Notes from daily staff meetings, including one at the White House on 10 December 1962, contained the following comments:

> After a little pessimistic brooding around the table, the discussion turned to broader issues. […] Bundy, Kaysen and Dungan said that one of the best things that could happen might be for the Congolese National Army to drop a few bombs in the Katanga from a few aircraft which the United States would furnish them for that purpose[1].
>
> The idea seemed to be that this would tend to remove a lot of the intricate complexities of the Congo problem (UN, UMHK, etc.) and perhaps reduce it to a nice clean war between Leopoldville and Elisabethville. There was a little laughter around the table at this suggestion. For example, Bundy said that "we were all certainly a bunch of hawks, but there was an unmistakable undercurrent of seriousness nevertheless."

By this time the Cuban pilots had been informed that they might be expected to mount an attack on the Avikat base at Kolwezi. Once the rocket rails had been fitted to the aircraft, they were flown to an airfield some distance from Leopoldville where the pilots began practicing for their attacks. Meanwhile, the United Nations also continued with attempts to find additional fighter aircraft.

Although Sweden had agreed in late November to send reinforcements to its unit, this was on the condition that other nations would also contribute aircraft. In early and mid December the UN tried to persuade, among others, Greece, Iran, Italy, Pakistan and the Philippines to contribute either aircraft or crews, but negotiations dragged on with nothing substantive taking place.

Eventually the Philippines agreed to provide pilots. These would fly aircraft provided by Italy, while Iran – then still under the Shah – promised both aircraft and crews, but it was clear that neither would arrive in the Congo for several weeks.

In some of these cases the Americans were quietly providing diplomatic support behind the scenes. With regard to aircraft from Italy, Washington did, in effect, provide the aircraft as well, since these had originally been supplied to Rome as part of a US aid package and technically, these planes were still the property of the United States.

Also, the option to use US military forces was still kept open and in fact received a lot of attention at the time due to the worsening political situation in the Congo.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote a recommendation early December 1962, stating that among other things, that body believed that “the central issue of the Congolese problem is to keep a pro-Western regime in power.” This would remain a problem as long as the Katanga problem remained unresolved.

They therefore recommended, “[i]f required to prevent the collapse of the Central Government, [to] offer the UN a US military package consisting of one Composite Air Strike Unit with necessary support elements.”

A detailed plan was also drawn up to send a fighter squadron with eight jet fighters and two reconnaissance aircraft. In the draft of the plan, many of the woes of the country were listed, including “the instability and administrative flabbiness” of the Adoula government and the latent threat of Soviet military assistance.

The State Department wrote just before Christmas that, “one of the most difficult problems facing Adoula [and his government] is the handicap they face in virtual freedom of air enjoyed by Katanga Air Force.” It was then suggested that the United Nations should destroy the Avikat on the ground, thereby indicating that air support for the Congolese obviously still had a high priority.

An American general was sent to the Congo on a fact-finding mission and one of his main tasks was to “assess the need for a US tactical fighter squadron in the Congo and to determine how this force could best be employed to advance US objectives there.”

According to an observer close to the president, one reason for this

mission was to enable President Kennedy to delay having to take a decision on the subject.

In the end Kennedy agreed to send the fighter unit if the United Nations made an official request for the US to do so. This came through on the second-last day of the year. Within hours, an American fighter wing began "planning and coordination… for a higher headquarters tasked move of a squadron of F-84 aircraft to a classified forward operating location."



The above shows how deeply supernatural traditions in Africa often penetrate. Following a battle in which members of Mike Hoare's 5 Commando were involved, some of his black soldiers stripped down to avoid what they believed were the influences of enemy Ju Ju curses. (Photos courtesy of Leif Hellström collection)

The aircraft situation at the end of December 1962 was therefore as follows:

- The United Nations fighter force had received some Swedish reinforcements, but the Swedish unit was considered unreliable and ineffective. Additional units from other countries had been promised but would take some weeks to arrive.
- A unit of the US Air Force had just started preparations to move to the

Congo from Europe to form part of the UN forces, but this too would take some time.

- The “Congolese Air Force”, i.e. the CIA air unit, had received its rocket armament and was training for a possible strike on Katanga in mid January.

Almost overnight, time had run out in the Congo. Fighting had broken out between United Nations forces and Katangan troops and when this continued, UN headquarters eventually decided to strike back.

By all accounts this was initially seen as just another “police action” and there was no indication that the UN expected any major changes to result. Days later a Swedish fighter unit attacked the Avikat base at Kolwezi and over the next couple of days the Katangan Air Force was almost totally destroyed on the ground. The few aircraft that survived fled to Angola to enjoy the protection of the Portuguese Government.

At the same time, UN ground forces moved forward and quickly captured the remaining Katangan strongholds with little or no resistance. Katangan secession formally ended on 14 January 1963.

What becomes clear with hindsight is that both the United Nations and Washington were taken by surprise by events as they rapidly unfolded. There was actually some reluctance to accept that, in the end, it had all been so easy. The manner in which the Avikat had been destroyed surprised just about everybody because they believed that the Katangans would put up stiff resistance. Indeed, opinion in Washington at the time was that “estimates of damage to it have been greatly exaggerated.” Even so, it was suggested that there was no longer any point in sending US aircraft to the Congo and the deployment was soon cancelled.

Implementation to send Philippine and Iranian fighter squadrons had however already been set in motion, and both units were allowed to go to the Congo, even though they were no longer needed. They stayed only a few months before returning home, however. The Swedish Air Force element – then the only United Nations fighter unit – remained in the Congo before it too was disbanded in September 1963.

With Katanga gone, there was no longer any immediate need for the CIA air unit, either. Adoula’s government was relatively safe for the time being and there were no immediate internal or external enemies threatening military action.

Even so, the Cuban pilots were left in place and they continued to fly the T-6s around Leopoldville, “to show the flag.” It was a relatively cheap way for the Americans to show support for Adoula’s government. Also, with Katanga gone, the Congo situation was largely defused and there was little or no political risk involved.

Until early 1964, the situation in the Democratic Congo Republic remained more or less unchanged, apart from periodic changes of personnel. It was then that a revolt against the Central Government broke out in the Kwilu province, to the east of Leopoldville. Kikwit, its capital, was to be used decades later as a staging post for the revolt led by Laurent Kabila in unseating President Mobuto Sese Seko in 1997[2].

The rebellion became known as the “Mulele Revolt,” after its leader, Pierre Mulele. A few weeks after the revolt started, the CIA air unit deployed to the front and subsequently flew numerous ground attack missions in support of the ANC.

In an unusual arrangement, the CIA aircraft would also fly air cover for rescue helicopters of the United Nations when these went to pick up refugees from Protestant and Catholic mission stations in remote areas. In return, the UN promised to provide a rescue service for any Cuban pilot forced to crash-land or bail out.



Horst Faas, the famous Vietnam photographer who died in 2012, gave the author this photo of a bunch of juvenile prospective fighters taken in Katanga's old Elizabethville (Lubumbashi today) half a century ago.

Later in that year, when a second, more serious revolt broke out further east in the Congo, the CIA air unit was greatly expanded and received more modern aircraft directly from Washington, again under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency. This expatriate group of mercenaries – for that is what they were – fought on for three more years, finally ending their security role late in 1967.

It is interesting that they lasted as long as they did in Africa. Following the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961, President Kennedy never again placed quite the same degree of trust in large paramilitary operations as had President Eisenhower.

On the other hand, 1961 onward saw increased focus on anti-guerrilla and other peripheral or "brush-fire" wars in the Third World. Portugal was fighting three major military campaigns in Africa and the Rhodesian war was about to take off, followed by a South African military role in Angola. This was a direct result of the Soviet Union's pledge to support so-called "wars of liberation" around the world.

All these factors raise the question: Was military intervention in the Congo at the behest of the Central Intelligence Agency necessary ?

For answers, one needs to look back at recent history. For example, Southeast Asia in 1961: When the USAF carried out a covert operation in Vietnam (all the while maintaining that it was part of the effort launched by the Vietnamese Air Force), the CIA set up a series of clandestine operations in Thailand for operations over Laos.

Both operations were roughly the same size; both were intended for the same type of missions and both operated the same kinds of aircraft. In addition, that CIA operation employed mainly USAF pilots on loan. Of significance here is that the CIA was seen as just another "tool" by the American government, in that it was an organization on par with any of the branches of the regular armed forces. The bottom line here was the consensus in Washington at the time that sending in the CIA was not necessarily considered a very dramatic decision. It was more a question of what was most practical in each given situation.

In the Congo in 1962, using the CIA was apparently regarded as a more pragmatic solution.

Compared to CIA air operations, Washington's efforts in the Congo were relatively modest as against other theatres of military activity such as in Asia. They were also "uncomplicated", not least because the crews operated in what could be regarded as a "friendly" country and had relatively free rein in the capital. Moreover, the aircraft involved in all these strikes were already there and the logistics support was uncomplicated.

At first, most of the actions could be regarded as "window-dressing", since their aircraft lacked armament. It actually took something like two months before the planes were made combat-ready. Things might have been different had the crews been called on to actually go into combat against Katanga, but this never happened.

1 McGeorge Bundy was Special Assistant to President Kennedy for National Security Affairs and attended all relevant White House briefings, especially those involving the Congo.

2 Al J. Venter: *War Dog – Fighting Other People's Wars*, Casemate Publishers, Philadelphia, 2006, which deals with subsequent mercenary activity in Mobutu's Zaire as well as Zimbabwe's military participation in those struggles. See chapters 10-13, pp. 241-320. See also the author's experiences in the Congo in *Barrel of a Gun – A War Correspondent's Misspent Moments in Combat*, Chapters 19-22, pp. 357-400.

CHAPTER FIVE

MERCENARIES IN BIAFRA'S AERIAL WAR OF ATTRITION

Considering that Nigeria is again – almost determinedly – sliding into another self-perpetuating civil war, it is perhaps appropriate to look back at the Biafran conflict of the late 1960s. A million people died in that tribal conflagration… a very high proportion of them being children. Sadly, history seems to be repeating itself in this corner of West Africa.

The introduction that I wrote for my final article on the Biafran war, shortly after I'd emerged from the fighting there late in 1969, just about says it all: "It was only a jungle airstrip in the heart of tropical West Africa, but Uli Airport – codename Annabelle – became a legend among the airline pilots of the world."

What I didn't say was that after weeks in that embattled enclave in which we were rocketed, machine-gunned and bombed every day, I was not only starving – there was no food in an enclave completely surrounded by Nigerian troops – but I was fairly seriously shell-shocked. Once I got back to Nairobi, my base at the time, I ate solidly for a week. My problems were compounded by the fact that each time a car backfired or somebody slammed a door, I would hurl myself to the ground. Those Nigerian experiences left their mark and the truth is, I still cannot handle noise.

Like most things in that dreadful conflict, everything that went on at Uli, the hub of the Nigerian civil war for three years in the late 1960s, was improvised: Uli's "airport" runway – lined on both sides by primeval jungle – had once been a stretch of main road between the towns of Aba and Onitcha in Eastern Nigeria.

When the electrics blew, which happened almost every night – usually as the first of the relief planes arrived overhead – ground crews would use cans of palm oil with lighted wicks to show the pilots where to bring their planes down. It was typically West African Heath Robinson, especially whenever the wind blew, but it worked. And things carried on that way for two years.

Frederick Forsyth said it best in his introduction to one of the top books to come out of the war[1], Mike Draper's Shadows: *Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria*":

"It was crazy, it was hairy, it was impossibly dangerous; it should never have worked. But somehow it did, night after night. When the planes landed and taxied into the welcome darkness by the side of the motorway-turned-landing-strip, willing hands hauled sacks of milk powder and bundles of stockfish out of the fuselages and away into the feeding centers. That done, the pilots taxied back to the takeoff point, the lights flickered on for a few seconds and they were gone…"

Forsyth, who was down with malaria when I got there, recalls that this was the story of the strangest air-bridge the world has ever seen. The airplanes used by the aid people were a ramshackle collection of time-expired or phased-out workhorses of the skies, culled from bone yards all over the globe. Had it not happened, he reckoned there would have been another million Biafran children starved into oblivion because the rebel state was blockaded by land, sea and air.



On the day after the second army mutiny in Lagos, which ultimately led to the Biafran War, the author found his office at Ikeja Airport (where he was based and from where the plot was hatched by Northern officers) surrounded by British armored cars, infantry fighting vehicles, troop carriers and more angry soldiers than he likes to remember. He describes these events, some of which almost got him killed, in his biography *Barrel of a Gun*. (Photo: Author – taken outside his office at Ikeja Airport)



A million children were to die behind Biafran lines, many of them from starvation. The Biafran War was the biggest military confrontation that Africa had seen since the end of World War II. The rebel state battled bravely for several years – including producing its own banknotes (left). (Photos: Author)

For their part, the Nigerians were just as active. Apart from shooting down an International Red Cross DC-7B relief plane loaded with baby food, South African, British, Egyptian and other mercenaries flew hundreds of MiG-17 missions for the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) against Biafran ground targets.

Interestingly, Moscow sold the MiGs to Nigeria with the proviso that no Western pilots were to get anywhere near them, though with the vicissitudes of war that quickly changed. Ares Klootwyk from Cape Town, an RAF-trained, South African mercenary pilot, became the first Westerner to take one of these Russian MiGs into combat.

Almost all these freebooters were recruited through a single company in Switzerland. The Egyptians, in contrast, who flew Nigerian Air Force Ilyushin IL-28 bombers, were notable for their inability to achieve anything spectacular. They would rarely drop below 10,000 feet for fear of ground fire that, at best, was pretty marginal because there was so little AAA ammunition being airlifted into the country.

In a sense, the single common denominator in this bloodletting was similar to what we see in Israel today: both sides hated each other with a religion-driven fury that even today defies description.

The Biafrans weren't altogether inactive in countering the Nigerian air offensive, though the rebels were able to offer only limited resistance with a tiny air force called "Biafran Babies" that had been put together at the behest of a swashbuckling Swedish philanthropist, Count Carl Gustaf Ericsson von Rosen, who had a rather persistent delusion that he could "change" Africa. It was Africa that killed him in the end when he died in a guerrilla attack in Somalia's Ogaden war in 1977.



Swedish pioneer aviator, mercenary and humanitarian Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen flew relief missions with cargoes of baby food into Biafra before he bought five – later increased to eight – MFI-9Bs Minicon warplanes in Sweden and had them secretly flown into the rebel enclave. A remarkable man, he was killed in Ethiopia's Ogaden War. (Photo courtesy of Leif Hellström)

He clandestinely brought five Swedish-built Malmö MFI-9Bs to the breakaway Nigerian state and created the Biafran Air Force. Initially the

planes were ferried into Biafra from Libreville, the capital of Gabon. Because of losses, these were supplemented by several more, totalling 11 Minicons by the time the war ended, American intelligence sources disclosed.

As “fighters” go, the Minicons were among the smallest modern combat aircraft ever built. But “Von Rosen’s Vengeance” – as the media called the little prop-driven planes – proved astonishingly effective. One blogger, who calls himself “Srbin” (all we know about him is that he was born in 1986) commented that “even the Skyraider was like an SR-71 compared to the little putt-putt plane around which Von Rosen built his force: the tiny Swedish trainer looked like those ultra-lights that people build in their garages. This plane could park in sub-compact spaces at one of Stockholm’s shopping malls… it had a maximum payload of 500 pounds, or, as he said, ‘me plus a couple of medium sized dogs.’ Lucky those Swedes are so skinny…

“…in Gabon, Von Rosen slapped on a coat of green VW paint to make them look military and on each aircraft, he installed twin wing pods for French-built Matra 68 mm unguided rockets. Then he and his pilots – three Swedish volunteers who took time off from their civilian jobs, together with three Nigerian Ibos – flew them back to Biafra and this unlikely septet went into combat.



Crashed Soviet MiG-17 that came down in the jungle near Port Harcourt. Apparently the pilot did not pay attention to his fuel levels. (Photo courtesy of Leif Hellström)

“They blew the hell out of the Nigerian Air Force as well as the Nigerian Army. These little fleas were impossible to bring down. Not a single one was knocked out of the sky, although they’d buzz home, sometimes riddled with holes… they flew three missions a day and their list of targets destroyed included Nigerian airfields, power plants, and troop concentrations.

“Caught napping on the ground, they also knocked out three Soviet MiG-17 jet fighters (and damaged two); one Ilyushin-28; one British-built Canberra bomber (as well as another damaged); the “Intruder” (a twin-engine DC-3 transport plane used to bomb civilian aid aircraft as they landed in the dark), as well as two helicopters, with another damaged. That was not a bad tally for a rebel air force that the Lagos government, throughout the three years of hostilities, routinely declared “did not exist.”

At one stage, to supplement the Minicons, the Biafran leader General Odumegwu Ojukwu bought a dozen T-6 Harvards, but they were in a poor condition with only four being airworthy. During their transit flight from Gabon to Biafra, two were lost. The remaining pair was used in strikes, usually in conjunction with the MFI-9s, nine of which were then still in service. During the latter part of the war, two MFI-9s were destroyed, presumably due to ground action, which could sometimes be intense.

Interestingly, Artur Alves Pereira, a Portuguese mercenary pilot (and at one stage, a squadron leader who flew T-6s as well as Minicons) left Biafra’s last remaining airport at Uga on 9 January 1970 and flew to Gabon. From there he headed home to Lisbon and although the war was over and all rebel offices in Portugal were closed, the now non-existent Biafran government sent him a check which covered all the war missions he had flown, as he told friends, “down to the last penny”.

He commented afterwards that this small example showed how special a people the Igbo [Ibos] are. “Which country in the world, let alone in Africa, would bother to fulfill its commitments to this extent ? Which messenger wouldn’t feel tempted to keep part, or even all of the money ?” Which, he admits, was quite a lot at that time, especially when the future seemed so uncertain to everybody involved.” Obviously, he concluded, there would have been no court to which to complain.

Another significant comment was that with experience gathered over time

at the “Sharp End”, the tiny Minicons, in true guerrilla style, turned their weaknesses – small size and low speed – to their own advantage. They were so slow that they *had* to fly real low… which made them almost impossible to hit in the jungle, since you never saw them until they were almost on top of you. The modest speed made for better aim: almost half of the four hundred 68 mm rockets they fired hit their targets, which is an amazing score for unguided aircraft munitions. (There used to be a joke in the United States Air Force during World War II and Korea, that if it wasn’t for the law of gravity, unguided rockets fired from aircraft couldn’t even hit the ground.)



South African mercenary pilot Ares Klootwyk stands in the cockpit of one of Moscow’s MiG-17s, recently delivered to Nigeria from the Soviet Union. Klootwyk was the first Western pilot to have flown these still top-secret warplanes, very much against the wishes of the Kremlin. His subsequent disclosures to Western intelligence agencies was of immense value in understanding the fighting capabilities of these jets. (Photo: courtesy of Leif Hellström)

Clearly, the little Swedish MF-19Bs packed a decisive punch. Apart from the Harvards, there was also a surplus World War II American-built B-26 bomber that had mixed fortunes before it crashed on a bombing raid over Lagos.

For much of the war, Uli remained the tenuous lifeline between Biafra and the world outside in this grim, internecine war. The “miracle of Uli”, as the hacks referred to it, hosted about 20 flights a night – though sometimes there were as few as five and occasionally as many as 40 aircraft, often loaded well beyond accepted international safety limits with tons of food and weapons and ammunition. All ran the Federal Nigerian blockade, crossing the coast near Port Harcourt where Soviet-made anti-aircraft guns were positioned.

The relief planes took numerous losses; some were hit while taxiing, while others were bombed by the so-called “Intruder”, an antiquated Nigerian Air Force C-47 that had been adapted to carry the 50-pound as well as 100-pound canisters of explosives that were manually hurled out of the aircraft’s open side door. Later the Nigerians bought some surplus B-25s.

Several of the civilian planes involved in the airlift were also accidentally shot down by Biafran ground fire, though the rebels denied it. They said it couldn’t happen, though on my own flight into the country our DC-6 was nearly hit by heavy machine-gun fire from the ground as we came in.

It certainly wasn’t Nigerian fire coming up at us because their lines were miles away.

With time, the Biafran conflict devolved into a series of holding actions, with the majority of the population doing their best simply to stay alive. In reality, though, after the first year of the war, the food situation in Biafra had become so critical that the entire nation was starving.

The only way to get food in was by an air bridge operated either from the Portuguese island of São Tomé or from Libreville, the Gabonese capital. The International Red Cross flew some flights from the former Spanish island of Fernando Po (Equatorial Guinea today) and from Cotonou in what was then still Dahomey, but that wasn’t a regular event and halted in June 1969 when one of its planes was shot down by a mercenary pilot flying a Nigerian MiG-17.

By mid-1968 international relief organizations were carrying out flights on a limited scale, often using the American flights that ferried weapons from Europe to Port Harcourt and later to Uli, that airstrip then still in Biafran hands.

When the Americans stopped going in because of the risk, Count von Rosen made a flight for the German Caritas welfare group in August of that year. The air connection from São Tomé was organized by a Scandinavian

group called Nordchurchaid and by January 1970 a total of 61,000 tons had been ferried across to Biafra in more than 5,000 flights. The International Red Cross, sometimes operating from Fernando Po and Cotonou, had taken in 20,290 tons by June 1969, when flights were finally suspended.

Once in Biafran air space, always after dark after the first few months of hostilities, things often got hectic, extremely so at times.

The following is an extract from a flight report of one of the aid pilots, dated May 1969:

> "…spent one hour and four minutes waiting in the air over the Uli field… made five aborted approaches. Nigerian bombers were harassing as usual, the landing lights came on too late or were turned off on final approach. The Intruder, i.e. the bomber, released his first bomb when we were at the end of our final approach.
>
> "When we first got clearance from the ground to approach at an altitude of 2,500 feet – from the east and towards the airport – we got instructions to return to the beacon we came from, EZ. An aircraft was being observed between us and the ground. The plane flew south.
>
> From Uli airfield we were told that this plane probably was GJE (New Zealand DC-6 from Cotonou). What he was doing there and who gave him clearance to go there I do not know."

Uli airfield was bombed incessantly during some periods, but the damage was quickly repaired. A total of 11 aircraft were destroyed with 21 aircrew killed. That figure included nine aircraft and 13 pilots belonging to church groups.

In November 1968 a Joint Church Aid DC-6 was damaged by a 44 lb. shrapnel bomb that exploded alongside the aircraft. Five people were killed and many injured, including the co-pilot Jan Erik Ohlsen and the pilot, Captain Kjell Bäckström. Ohlsen was flown out by a Red Cross plane, but Bäckström decided to try and do the impossible and take his damaged aircraft out. It had 50 shrapnel holes along one side and two of its engines were leaking oil. Despite his injuries, Bäckström succeeded in getting himself and his aircraft to São Tomé, where Portuguese surgeons operated on him at the local hospital. Three pieces of shrapnel were removed from his body.

Eight crew members flying for the Red Cross were killed in a crash in

May 1969 and in an aircraft shot down the following month by Nigerian forces. Joint Church Aid lost a total of 13 crew members.



Nigerian Air Force jets were often just parked at the end of jungle strips and left there for the night, without any protection from the elements. The same situation could be seen outside the author's office at Lagos's Ikeja Airport, with new Delphin jet trainers bought from Czechoslovakia that were often left with their cockpits open to the rain. (Photo courtesy of Leif Hellström)

Four crew members died when a German aircraft crashed in July 1968, and on 7 December 1968, a German DC-7 crash-landed at Uli, killing another four.

Then, on 4 August 1969, a Canadian Canairelief Super Constellation crashed, killing its crew of four. Five Americans died in an air crash on 26 September 1969. Thereafter, four additional aircraft were totally destroyed without loss of life and two more damaged beyond repair, all at Uli.

In spite of these losses in crews and machines, the air relief program was an enormous success. One needs to look at the figures to appreciate this. In church relief flights alone (never mind the numerous nightly arms-runs) there were 7,350 freight flights into Biafra in the three years that war ravaged eastern Nigeria. Over this time almost a million tons of supplies, including arms, were flown into the beleaguered territory.

During the course of all operations into Biafra 15 aircraft were lost and 25 aircrew killed, the majority of them buried in a small cemetery adjacent to Uli Airport. The Nigerian Army bulldozed the graves when it was over: they didn't need any "martyrs" in the aftermath, the military declared.

In the initial stages of the war Egypt sent 15 MiG fighters to the Nigerian Air Force. Cairo was then supporting a host of revolutionary groups, while also making a huge effort to overrun Yemen in the southern Arabian Peninsula. (This was countered by Britain's Special Air Service, with the help of mercenaries, including the French freebooter Bob Denard[2]).

Later, Algeria and Egypt provided six Ilyushin-28s. In addition, twelve L-29 Delphins came from Czechoslovakia, two Jet Provosts from Sudan, two Westland Whirlwinds from Austria and a pair of Gnome Whirlwinds and an FH-1100 from Britain.



World War II vintage B-25 bombers – some of which had seen action against Japanese forces in the Pacific War – were also used in the Biafran War by both sides. (Photos courtesy of Michael Draper)

While I worked for John Holt Shipping Services in Nigeria, the Delphins were parked on the runway outside my office and since the second Nigerian Army mutiny took place while I was living in Lagos, I deal with these episodes in considerable detail in one of my books, *Barrel of a Gun*, which

was published by Casemate Publishers in America and Britain in 2010[3].

Shortly after hostilities started, Lagos decided to recruit mercenary aircrews, largely because Nigerian pilots were unable to manage the intricacies of modern fighters and bombers. These “guns for hire” came from a dozen countries.

What followed, starting in 1967, was a huge number of attacks by the Nigerian Air Force on schools, hospitals and market places. Though there were sporadic interruptions, the aerial strikes continued until the end of hostilities. Virtually every hospital in Biafra was attacked at some stage or another, sometimes many times over, underscoring observations made by independent observers – including members of the church who worked in the enclave – that these were “terror” bombings and had absolutely no military value. Indeed, it was confirmed long afterwards by others who put pen to paper that the attacks served only to strengthen Biafran resolve to resist.



The Nigerian leader Colonel Yakubu Gowon. (Photo: Nigerian Government)

During the first few months of the war, the Biafrans had certain advantages in the air war, especially since they had pilots who were better trained and fought with greater motivation, if only because their survival was at stake.

Most Biafran Air Force (BAF) pilots and mechanics had previously served with Nigerian Airways or the fledgling Nigerian Air Force.

An important contribution was also made by Friedrich “Freddy” Herz, an old friend of most of the Biafran pilots trained in Germany. On the outbreak of this West African struggle, Herz was living in West Germany. His Biafran friends wrote asking him to come over and lend a hand. After some deliberation he headed to Cameroon, to the south of Nigeria, and obtained permission to enter Biafra, where his friends took him to Enugu, the newly created Biafran capital.

Since this was his first visit to Biafra, he was carefully vetted. Only after a few weeks did he get to meet the BAF Commander, Colonel Zoki, who believed his explanation that he wanted to help the Biafrans with no other compensation than food and board.

At this time the situation at Enugu was critical. The Nigerians were pushing in hard from the north and were close to the town. At Enugu airport the Biafrans had two B-25 Mitchells and one B-26 which was christened “The Marauder”. Freddy had never flown these types before, but together with Colonel Ezilo he managed to fly the first B-25 to Port Harcourt, return to Enugu by road and then take out the remaining B-25.

The B-26 caused more problems; its brakes were faulty and the Biafrans didn’t want to allow it to take off. With both the airfield and Enugu itself being overrun by Nigerian troops soon afterwards, that bomber was lost in the fighting.

A few weeks later the Air Force Commander, Colonel Zoki, was killed. During this critical phase of the war Freddy also participated in a ground operation at Onitsha, on the Niger River, where he helped Biafran soldiers erect rocket launchers.

Freddy later went to Port Harcourt where the two B-25s were now stationed. Together with the Biafrans and a Cuban pilot, Freddy checked the aircraft carefully and then carried out test runs on each. Shortly afterwards he undertook a number of raids in the two B-25s as well as a DC-3 Dakota converted for use as a bomber. The targets were enemy positions and

formations, primarily in south-eastern Biafra and in the mid-west region. This was done in cooperation with the army, and this BAF activity delayed the Nigerian advance on the southern front considerably.

Late in 1967 a night raid was carried out against the Nigerian port city of Calabar, adjacent to the border with the Cameroun Republic. The city was then in the hands of Nigerian troops. As detailed in Gunnar Haglund's book published in Swedish and titled *Gerillapilot i Biafra* (Guerrilla Pilot in Biafra) the raid was to be carried out with the DC-3, one of the "liberated" B-25s and a newly delivered B-26, said to have been flown to Biafra directly from South America.

After dark, the three crews prepared for takeoff. The DC-3 and B-26 had already been refueled and loaded up with incendiary bombs, many of them home-made. Orders were that the DC-3 and the B-26 bomber would depart first, find their targets (which were designated as Calabar's industrial area and airfield) and they would drop their incendiaries. In the light of this intended carnage, the idea was for Freddy to arrive over the target area in his B-25 and drop conventional high-explosive bombs on factory buildings and hangars in the vicinity.

The three aircraft took off and formed up over the airfield before setting off for Calabar at relatively low level. The crews were tense, since Calabar was known to be ringed by heavy anti-aircraft gun emplacements.

Before arriving over an astonishingly well-lit Calabar, the DC-3 and B-26 climbed to a little over 3,000 ft. and then dived and dropped their loads, resulting in a number of blazes. Parts of the area were "lit up almost like day", Freddy recalled afterwards. He could easily make out the factory buildings they were after, so came in low at a couple of hundred meters to drop his HE bombs in the face of intense AAA ground fire.

The aircraft involved in the strike took a number of hits, but as Freddy admitted afterwards, his B-25 emerged reasonably intact and none of the four men on board were injured. Freddy made a steep turn and headed back towards Port Harcourt at low altitude, in part to avoid any Nigerian Air Force MiGs that might be circling the region. It wasn't long before his instruments told him that the fuel tanks were leaking. The aircraft had taken a good deal more damage than he first realized.

When Freddy finally managed to make contact with air traffic control at Port Harcourt the B-25was given almost immediate clearance to land. By now, he recalled, the fuel gauge was registering almost zero, and from

experience he was aware that he had perhaps only a few gallons of fuel left in the tank. At that point they were very close to the airport with the runway lights stretching out ahead of them, which was when air traffic control gave them clearance to go in directly rather than complete the usual circuit. Freddy reduced power and that in itself was a huge relief, he commented.

Haglund records what followed: “Their old B-25 made a short turn in towards the runway and descended a bit more. Flaps were extended to reduce speed, then the landing gear. The other aircraft, which had been just in front of them all the way, had reached the point where it was in the process of landing and Freddy’s aircraft had only a few hundred yards left to touchdown.

“Suddenly the traffic controller called over the radio: ‘Abort landing ! Immediate !’ Apparently a plane just ahead had crashed on the runway !

“As Freddy recalled, everything happened very quickly. They had to interrupt their landing and climb again, raise their landing gear, pull up flaps and moderate the throttle to avoid wasting what little fuel remained. The cockpit crew feared the worst.

“Freddy prayed that it might just be possible to go around the field, just a small circuit, so that ground crews could get the crashed aircraft off the runway. But then, not entirely unexpected after half a circuit, one of the engines coughed… then the other…

“Both engines stuttered again in unison for a few seconds and then fell silent. Freddy and Ezilo prepared for a make-or-break emergency landing in the dark, turning on their landing lights in the process while sinking fast towards the ground.

“Freddy spotted a clearing in the bush diagonally in front of them. The bomber was just above the ground when one of its wings hit a tree. A moment later the aircraft ploughed into the ground, bounced a few times and slid along the ground into a clearing. Freddie remembers the thuds, the screech of metal-on-metal, together with scrapes and creaking noises everywhere. Finally, there was a terrible bang and everything went quiet.”

Freddy and his co-pilot woke to find themselves in the Port Harcourt hospital. Sammy, their navigator, had been killed instantly. The rear gunner was a lot more fortunate because he had fallen out of the aircraft on impact and came away from it all with an injured leg.

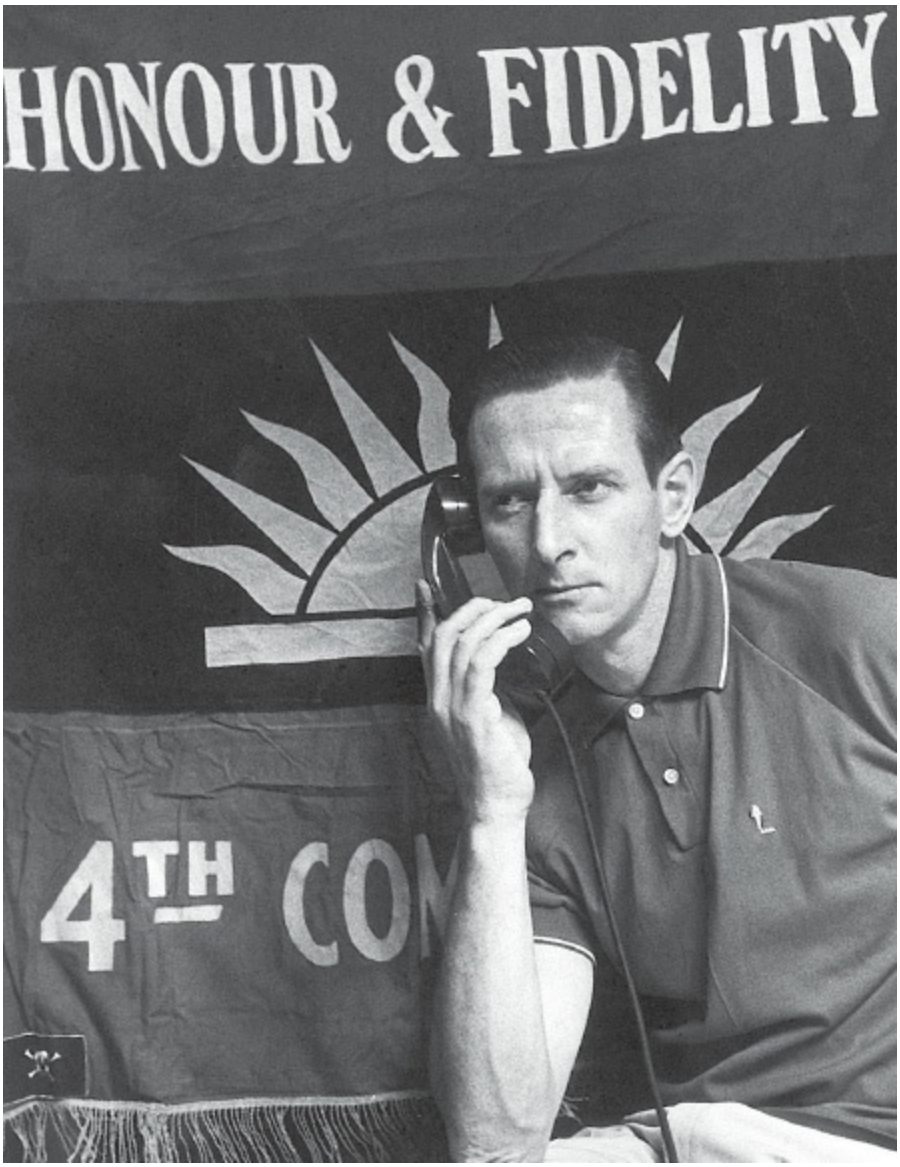
Despite this, the records tell us today, the raid on Calabar had been an

unmitigated success. Numerous targets had been destroyed; the airport, the city's factory area as well as a fuel depot – all in the same vicinity – had been devastated, largely through having been set alight by incendiaries.

According to Haglund, Freddy's nerves had taken a pounding and he wanted to get away from the war. After almost three weeks in hospital, and with his leg mending, he returned to Europe.

But like most veterans bored with domesticity at home, it seems that this aviator couldn't keep away from where everything was happening and by January 1968 he was back in Biafra. By then, Nigerian forces had taken Port Harcourt, as well as the two surplus American bombers that had been left standing at the airport, and there was nothing for him to fly.

The year 1968 passed without Biafra acquiring any new aircraft. Several attempts were made to buy old, surplus planes – both jet and propeller aircraft – from different sources. Most deals came close to being finalized with the aircraft prepared for delivery, but each time the transactions came to nothing. Those attempts ended up costing the Biafrans bucket-loads of precious foreign currency, but they still failed to obtain the aircraft they so desperately needed.



Taffy Williams, a Welsh/South African mercenary fought valiantly in Biafra against government forces. He survived that war, as he did several Congo uprisings. After he had returned to Britain and fallen on bad times, Frederick Forsyth helped him several times in later years. (Photo: Author's collection)

Enter Count von Rosen and his Swedish Minicons, which warrants a few words about this remarkable aviator. During the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935-36, the Count flew a Heinkel HD-21 and later a Fokker F VII that had been equipped as ambulance aircraft. Then, following the Russian invasion of Finland in 1939, he donated a DC-2 and two Koolhoven FK 52s to the Finnish AF. The DC-2 was rebuilt as an ad hoc bomber by SAAB in Trollhättan in Sweden with a dorsal gunner's position and external bomb racks. Apparently the DC-2 was even considered for a bombing sortie against

the Kremlin ! During the war Von Rosen flew several sorties in Blenheims as well as with the DC-2.
Getting to Biafra from São Tomé or Libreville was an event: the Nigerians were waiting for us.

As soon as we crossed the coastline somewhere near Port Harcourt, I spotted flashes of artillery fire on the ground that quickly became brilliant orange balls of flak as they exploded a few thousand feet below us. I watched the panoply through the porthole nearest me, transfixed by the sheer terror of it. It was a bit like being at the movies… but for real !

Only after the war did it emerge that the nightly shuttle of aircraft was part of a giant charade… a chess game of sorts that the superpowers tended to indulge in from time to time. The Nigerian anti-aircraft guns and their crews were actually Russian and, somehow, those who made these nightly flights into Biafra were aware that the fuses had been set to explode the shells at 14,000 ft. Meanwhile, we crossed the coast at 18,000 ft. They could have shot us down any time they chose.

Our approach to Uli Airport was made in the black. Once we crossed the coast there wasn't a light to be seen anywhere on the ground, apart from some heavy calibers shooting at us from what I worked out were the front lines of the war. What compounded matters, I was soon to discover, was that none of the aircraft approaching Uli used navigation lights, even though there were sometimes eight or ten aircraft stacked above and below us.

Getting on to the ground at Uli was a mammoth nightly operation that seemed to work but, considering the impediments, shouldn't have. There was a joke among relief crews: If they were all to simultaneously switch on their lights while circling Uli, half the pilots would have died of heart attacks… they were flying that close to each other.

The actual landing process too, was dicey. With time, a succession of routines was developed with the result that our descent was ultra-steep. Pilots would maneuver their aircraft into position before sets of improvised runway lights were switched on for about five or six seconds. That was all the time they had to get their bearings. Meanwhile, our man was talking with ground control.

Though the world was black outside, most of the pilots would have some idea of where they were while circling because landing lights flashed irregularly before touchdown. Once into short finals, another few seconds of lights were allowed and that was that. It was a pretty precise operation and

spoke a lot for the skill of the old timers flying these ageing hulks: many of the pilots were retired airline veterans.

More mercenaries flew the Nigerian Air Force bomber that had been dubbed “Intruder” by the civilian flight crews. It usually stayed at around 18,000 ft. and would wait for things to develop. Its pilot would try to drop his HE canisters just as an approaching aircraft came into finals, the hope being that the explosives would go off immediately before touchdown.

As Forsyth recalls, “anyone listening in on the same wavelength could hear merc pilots flying the Nigerian bombers jeering at them, daring them to land when the lights flashed those few elusive seconds.”

The bombers rarely succeeded in causing serious damage. But when they did, the Nigerian propaganda machine would spin into action and Lagos newspapers would crow that Uli Airport had been crippled. It sometimes took a week to put things right again and often the Biafrans would find alternate stretches of road. Then the process would begin all over again.

A notable sidelight to these events is that in their final approach to Uli many pilots would come in so low that the fuselage would sometimes clip the tops of palms. Later, back at base, aircrews would compare notes about “green props.” Just about everybody experienced them from time to time. There were also the occasional “red props”: since most loading teams were made up of members of the local population who knew little about the dangers of modern aircraft, there were instances of them walking into propellers while the planes were being offloaded.

Out of Libreville, our own flight had its moments. As the only passenger on board, I was relegated to the back. Between the flight deck and me was a mountain of baby food.

From where I sat, I had a grand portside view of what was happening. It wasn’t much, but a full moon allowed me to see a few of the contours of a black and rather ominous African continent below. Diminutive flashes peppered us once we crossed the coast, not far from Port Harcourt, and exploded harmlessly below where we were flying. Things became tenser once we approached Uli. What I wasn’t to know until after it happened was that the “Intruder” had dropped his load while our L-1049H Super Constellation – in concert with half a dozen other freighters – was brought into finals. Our wheels were already down.

Then came a brilliant flash, quickly answered by some heavy stuff from the clusters of Biafran Bofors anti-aircraft guns on the periphery. A line of tracer cut across our nose. Our pilot pulled back sharply on the throttle. The old four-engined bird lumbered slowly towards starboard and an excuse for cloud that passed for cover. We circled for another hour before we tried again and this time we were able to put down.

It is perhaps appropriate to look at the causes of this African civil war in which a million people died. At the time, it was the biggest military conflict the continent had experience since the end of World War II.

What happened in the earlier phases was that with independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria was divided into three distinct regions: the two in the south were largely Christian/animist while the northern half of the country was both bigger and more populous than the other two together. The Muslim heart of the upper half was centered on the ancient trading city of Kano. It also had control of Nigeria's government and its army and therein, sadly, lay the seeds of a bitter, bloody internecine war that was to last three years.

The flashpoint that led to this carnage came in 1966 when a group of young Eastern (Christian) officers launched a military *coup d'état* against the central government in Lagos which, in their wisdom, they believed was utterly corrupt and being run by zealots. Almost as afterthought, they murdered some of the most respected northern political/religious leaders including the venerable Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, honored by the Queen on Nigeria's independence in 1960 as a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In the time-honored tradition of Islamic retribution, this act demanded more than a simple riposte.

Seven months later, a group of northern army officers, most regarding themselves as "Sons of the Prophet", struck back with a countercoup. They ousted the Ibo leader, General Ironsi, who had taken over the government and with that act they set off a pogrom that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of easterners who had settled in the north, some of them generations back.

Multitudes of Ibos fled back to the protection of their self-appointed leader, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu. Already the Eastern Region was referring to itself as Biafra. Confident that the vast oil resources of his region could support him, Ojukwu refused to accept any kind of military authority that Lagos wished to impose on the country. If the violence against

his people continued, he warned, he and his tribal people would go it alone and Biafra would secede from the Nigerian Federation.



Two Biafran ground crew members at one of the tiny airports hidden in the jungle interior, with one of the Minicons parked in the background. (Photo: Author's collection)

This was the last thing that Britain and the US needed at the height of the Cold War. Vietnam was still a strategic factor and if Nigeria were to fragment, the domino effect could affect Africa as well. They were also alarmed because overnight, a young Nigerian Army upstart that nobody had heard of before was threatening their oil investments. Yet they acknowledged that they were powerless to stop the situation that, because of the slaughter of the innocents, was being termed "barbarous" by the international media.

Biafra now declared itself independent. Ojukwu had meanwhile secretly launched a massive build-up of arms with the help of people like the American arms dealer Hank Warton and Rhodesia's illustrious Jack Malloch. Both men, together with arms merchants from France, Holland, Germany and China, worked hand-in-glove with several European governments including France, Portugal and Spain to supply weapons to the rebel state. Soon Biafra was recognized by three African countries: Gabon, the Ivory Coast and Mauritania.

South Africa too eventually got sucked into this morass with Special Forces Colonel Jan Breytenbach and several others involved in Biafran

operations, training and tactical issues. It suited Pretoria to become clandestinely involved because the whole fracas took the focus of attention off their problems back home.

In the end, there were mercenaries from a variety of nations in Biafra. For several reasons, which included isolation, lack of communications and an extremely harsh tropical climate in an area that we hacks had dubbed "the armpit of Africa", these "Dogs of War" had curiously little impact on the eventual outcome. They very quickly ran up against an entrenched level of bias from Biafra's officer corps who believed that they could do better than a rag-tag bunch of hired guns. The fact that almost all of the mercenaries were white didn't help.

Hostilities ended abruptly in January 1970 after the Biafran people, simply put, had been starved into submission. It is notable that the slaughter of Ibos – which was forecast after Federal forces had overrun the rebel territory – never happened.

Today, well into the New Millennium, history seems to be repeating itself in Africa's most populous nation.

1 Michael Draper: *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria*, 1967-1970: a delightful work detailing the exploits of a former Biafran relief pilot, Michael I. Draper, with an introduction by Frederick Forsyth (who had been in Biafra for more than a year by the time that Venter arrived in the enclave).

2 Duff *Hart-Davis:* The War That Never Was: The True Story of the Men who Fought Britain's Most Secret Battle, Century, a division of Random House, London, 2011

3 Al J. Venter, *Barrel of a Gun: A War Correspondent's Misspent Moments in Combat*, Casemate US and UK, 2010.



Top: the cargo ship *Iceberg 1* was held hostage for ransom for three years, with more than two dozen crew members onboard. The freighter took a serious hammering from a South African mercenary group that launched a rescue mission. Below: the Alouette gunship deployed by Somalia's Puntland Government challenges a group of dhows that have been found to be approaching the African mainland from the Yemen. These boats are used to smuggle weapons, munitions and al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab insurgents into the country from the Middle East. (Photos: Arthur Walker)





Top: During the 12-day *Iceberg 1* stand-off, a Russian recoilless gun was brought into action and used to good advantage against the pirates who eventually called for talks. (Photo: Roelf van Heerden) The bottom pictures were taken by the author when Cobus Claassens was active out of Sierra Leone against West African pirates and illegal fishing by Chinese trawlers. (Photo: Author)





Arthur Walker took these photos when he was still flying the Alouette helicopter gunship out of Bosaso in Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region. They show the chopper as well as some of the air crew as well as Somali ground forces. All the weapons originally came from Russia.



Eagle’s eye-view of the main military base and airport at Bosaso, Puntland, from where anti-piracy raids are routinely launched. The inset shows one of the government fighters air-lifted to hospital in the Alouette after being wounded in a fire-fight with pirates. (Source of photos not identified)





Top: final approach to the main operational air base at Kandahar in Afghanistan, one of the busiest “friendly” aviation assets in Central Asia. Below: Neall Ellis took this photo after overflying the consequences of a Taliban ambush in a town to the west of Kabul. (Photos: Neall Ellis)







Top left: mercenaries of a different hue, one of the merc “shooters” about to board a support chopper in Afghanistan in contrast to an earlier period when there were thousands of freelance fighters working in

Iraq (right). (Photos: Neall Ellis and Greg Lovett) Below: harsh conditions in rural Afghanistan were caught on camera by Neall Ellis, showing a remote ‘cultivated’ valley in contrast to the semi-desert that almost totally surrounds it.





Top: (foreground) a South African Mi-8 support chopper at a forward operational base in Afghanistan. Foreign air crews were not always well received by American forces deployed there: indeed some Russian airmen flying helicopter support missions were shunned, and in at least one instance led to the loss of a chopper and crew when a violent storm blew up and the pilot was forced to return to his base. Below: an Aerostat balloon that hovered permanently over the ruins of the Kabul palace of the former president when “Nellis” was still operational in this part of Central Asia. (Photos: Neall Ellis)





Top: American military helicopters often shared landing pads in remote Afghan areas, in this instance,

in the shadow of an Islamic mosque. Below: a selection of operational photos from Afghanistan, including field maintenance work, a commercial Chinook owned and operated by a Colombian PMC, South African air crews around a Christmas “braai” in Kabul and a USAF C-130 about to depart for the interior. (Photos: Neall Ellis)





Top: a pair of “Shooters” onboard one of the support choppers in Afghanistan. Civilian air crews are not allowed to carry weapons while flying in the interior of the country, so freelance mercenaries are customarily hired to protect them should the aircraft be brought down. Below: one of the checkpoints on the main road leading to the Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq during that war. (Photos: Neall Ellis)


RIGHT DOD ONLY
US/COALITION
الخط الأيمن لحاملي الـ DOD فقط
الولايات المتحدة/ التحالف



“You can take your chopper high over the mountains in Afghanistan, but never high enough to escape the weather, which sometimes creeps in behind you before you know it,’ said Neall Ellis. You kept your guard up at all times because the mountains were also Taliban strongpoints and if they could, they would fire at passing Coalition helicopters. (Photos: Neall Ellis)


AS



Top: the reason why helicopter support missions operated by private military companies are vital to the Afghan war effort is because there are explosives everywhere on the country's roads – either landmines or IEDs. This was an armored personnel carrier destroyed by an enormous blast and photographed by US Army Lieutenant Ryker Sentgeorge shortly after it happened. Below: is Qalat, regularly supplied by civilian helicopters operating in Afghanistan. The ancient city is reputed to have been founded by Alexander the Great in his conquest of Central Asia 2,400 years ago. (Photo: Neall Ellis)





No modern war has seen such a large and diverse number of operational helicopters as Afghanistan.

These include commercial Chinooks, South African Pumas, French Gazelles as well as this Bell OH-58 Kiowa Warrior (above), a scout chopper with long-range day and night target acquisition and which can be operational 10 minutes after being unloaded from a C-130. Below: the heavily-guarded residential quarters used by some of the senior staff working for Mauritz le Roux's mercenary company SafeNet in Iraq. (Photos: Neall Ellis)





Top: there were not many parts of Afghanistan that Neall Ellis and his crews did not fly to, usually taking in food, munitions or general goods needing to be resupplied. Below: a bunch of “shooters” deploy to their assigned choppers for a day’s work. (Photos: Neall Ellis)

Opposite page: (top) Danny O’Brien was running the show at ICI-Oregon when the author was still living in Washington and he sent this photo of him on a Pakistan aid mission with which his company had been tasked. Though he has seen action in many parts of the world including Sierra Leone and Liberia, lending a hand at the behest of the US State Department is also one of his briefs. (Photo: Danny O’Brien) The two photos below that were taken by Neal Ellis in Afghanistan, the bottom one showing him with Mi-8 pilots Peter Minnaar (center) and Louis Venter (right).


MARSHALLING
POINT









Two shots from Tanzania, when Neall Ellis – a renowned mercenary pilot – was entrusted with ferrying the president around the country. He did so for several months in 2011, during the build-up to national elections. Above is what is termed in the trade a “Brown-Out”, graphically and often frighteningly illustrating one of the problems that face helicopter pilots who work in remote parts of Africa. The bottom photo shows “Nellis” greeted by President Kikwete.


JESA AIR

CHAPTER SIX

AN AMERICAN WARRIOR IN SOUTH LEBANON

Michigan native Dave McGrady went to Africa at the behest of Al Venter, following an exchange of letters in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Venter sent him to Rhodesia, where Dave ended up providing security on a farm at the "sharp end" before trying a spell of bounty hunting. When that ended, Dave contacted one of Al's old friends, Yoram Hamisrachi, a colonel in the Israeli Army Reserve. Yoram had just formed the South Lebanon Army and was hiring foreigners to fight Islamic radicals. "It wasn't anything 'nice'. In fact the money, food and accommodation were terrible… but interesting it certainly was." This is Dave's story.

It was just another night in Lebanon: an all-night patrol in the M113 armored personnel carrier. We snaked our way up and down hills and through villages where the roads were so tight that I was constantly hiking my side-mounted 30-cal Browning straight up in the air to clear walls, trees, brush, etc.

Israeli searchlights scanned the sky above in search of gliders. Occasionally an artillery shell would whiz overhead on its way to a Palestinian target. We were so close to the border fence that I could easily see the lights of Israeli settlements below. The clatter of our tracks on the pavement wasn't only bone rattling, but let everyone know we were coming. If that didn't do it, the headlights certainly would.

At any moment I expected an insurgent to pop out from behind a large boulder or atop a building with RPG in hand to turn us in charred toast. A stop in a village near Bint Jbeil gave me a good opportunity to observe the

slaughter of cattle with a knife blade across the throat, then the skinning.

My comrades in arms slept for a while along the walls of storefronts and other buildings. Bored by standing around just watching them, I started walking the alleys close by looking for bad guys while keeping one eye on my sleeping buddies.

After a few hours we left to take a two-track, throat clogging, dusty dirt road below Beaufort Castle, where we came to an abrupt halt. Hearing a commotion from behind I turned, only to be blinded by a flare round dropped down the portable mortar tube that’s quickly attached to the rear of the M113. We let that round drift down into the valley below while keeping a close eye on the castle way above us. Almost as if we were saying: Here we are, shoot at us.



American mercenary Dave McGrady, with no military background, performed very well during the Rhodesian War. He even took his own weapons into the country. That included a semi-auto AR-15, on which he installed a retractable stock and a longer flash guard and for a side-arm a Colt 45 ACP. In Lebanon he was issued with a Belgian FN. (Photo: Dave McGrady).

Some nights we would just go to Joseph's house to talk with IDF (Israeli Defense Force) officers carrying 5.55 mm CARs while we all listened to the chatter on their military radio. Joseph's wife served us strong Arab coffee in little cups to keep us awake while we kept a ear open for our call sign,

“Arnab, Arnab” (rabbit, rabbit). Then we’d grab our weapons, run outside to the APC, climb abroad, rip the canvas off the guns, chamber rounds and head out. Just another night in Lebanon with the South Lebanon Army (SLA).

So how did I end up in southern Lebanon ? After my days in Rhodesia, and bored blind back home in the US, I began to look for another “just cause” conflict where I could help the world’s poor, downtrodden and oppressed. It took some research, but Major Sa’ad Haddad’s SLA seemed to fit the bill.

After a few letters back and forth – Haddad seemed impressed by my work in Rhodesia – I got the nod and was off to New York’s JFK International to board a flight for Tel Aviv, Israel. That’s where my first series of problems started. I always bring along my own combat clothing and web gear, knowing that wherever I’m going, probably lacks either or the quality is terrible.

But when Israeli customs based at JFK saw what I had in my luggage, of course they wanted to know what I was up to. I showed them my letters from Major Haddad and they examined them closely, asking numerous questions. Then they smiled and became very polite, obviously approving of my venture. But now departure time was looming. We grabbed my two cases and sprinted to the gangway, only to see the plane pulling away. The customs guy assured me he would have me on the next flight out, a five-hour wait before flying via Montreal.

Once in Tel Aviv, the authorities required that I leave the sidearm the pilot had been holding for me in customs, saying: “Oh, you won’t need that up on the border, or in Southern Lebanon, because all is peaceful there.” Which had me scratching my head. My arguments fell on deaf ears so off I went without my weapon.

A bus ride from Tel Aviv ended up at the Arazim Hotel in Metulla late evening. All major news networks, US military officers and IDF hang out there because it’s so close to the Lebanon border.

A month or so later I arrived back at the Arazim one night dressed in my IDF uniform. Even with my beard, and walking with my Lebanese commanding officer and other Lebs, the US military officer sitting by the window seemed to recognize me as being American: either that, or he hated Haddad’s people. He gave me a dirty look and I gave him one back. Seconds later, the world famous author John Le Carré stopped me in my tracks and asked if he could

talk to me. I said: not until he got permission from Major Haddad. He said OK and I thought that was the end of it.

The next day, after a walk around Marjayoun, Haddad's stronghold and base, I returned to the bombed-out church us few foreigners were using as our barracks to see three IDF jeeps and military personnel walking around with a couple of civilians, including the guy I recognized from the hotel.

Well, he had got the permission he needed, and asked to talk to me again. He commented afterwards that what I told him might be in his next book. The IDF officers were giving me the evil eye the whole time, making sure I didn't say anything they didn't want me to. That interview ended up in the *Miami Tribune*.

My arrival in Southern Lebanon felt like something out of a spy novel. It was probably 10pm, and I was sitting in the hotel reception watching TV with some tourists when the desk clerk came up to me and said loud enough for all to hear: "Haddad's people are here to pick you up," which turned heads in my direction. I grabbed my bags, threw them into the back of a military truck and jumped in be greeted by a Canadian named Tim, who had served in the Canadian military. He started telling me what to expect as we drove past the IDF guards holding open the border gate and crossed into Southern Lebanon.

I was dropped off at a small bunker and Tim told me someone would be by soon to pick me up to meet Major Haddad. None of the Lebs I encountered spoke English. About 30 minutes later a military jeep rolled up to take me to Haddad, who was very glad to see me. I learned later he was very impressed by what I had done in Southern Africa and the publicity I had received. My reputation also spread rapidly throughout our operational area.

Major Haddad seemed to believe I was heads above most of the Lebs serving under him. The day I told him I was returning to the US because of boredom, he appeared sad, and then said: "If you return, bring eight more just like you." Never did understand how he came up with that number. Anyway, I gave him my Gerber Mk II fighting knife as a going away gift. That put a smile on his face: he quickly turned to his driver and lunged at his crutch… making the driver move like he never had before.

Major Haddad detailed me as a gunner on the M113 of his favorite commander, Joseph Abu Arage. I took that as the honor it was intended. Needless to say, Haddad and I hit it off and we became friends. He pretty much ignored the other foreigners. Every time he saw me in the field on

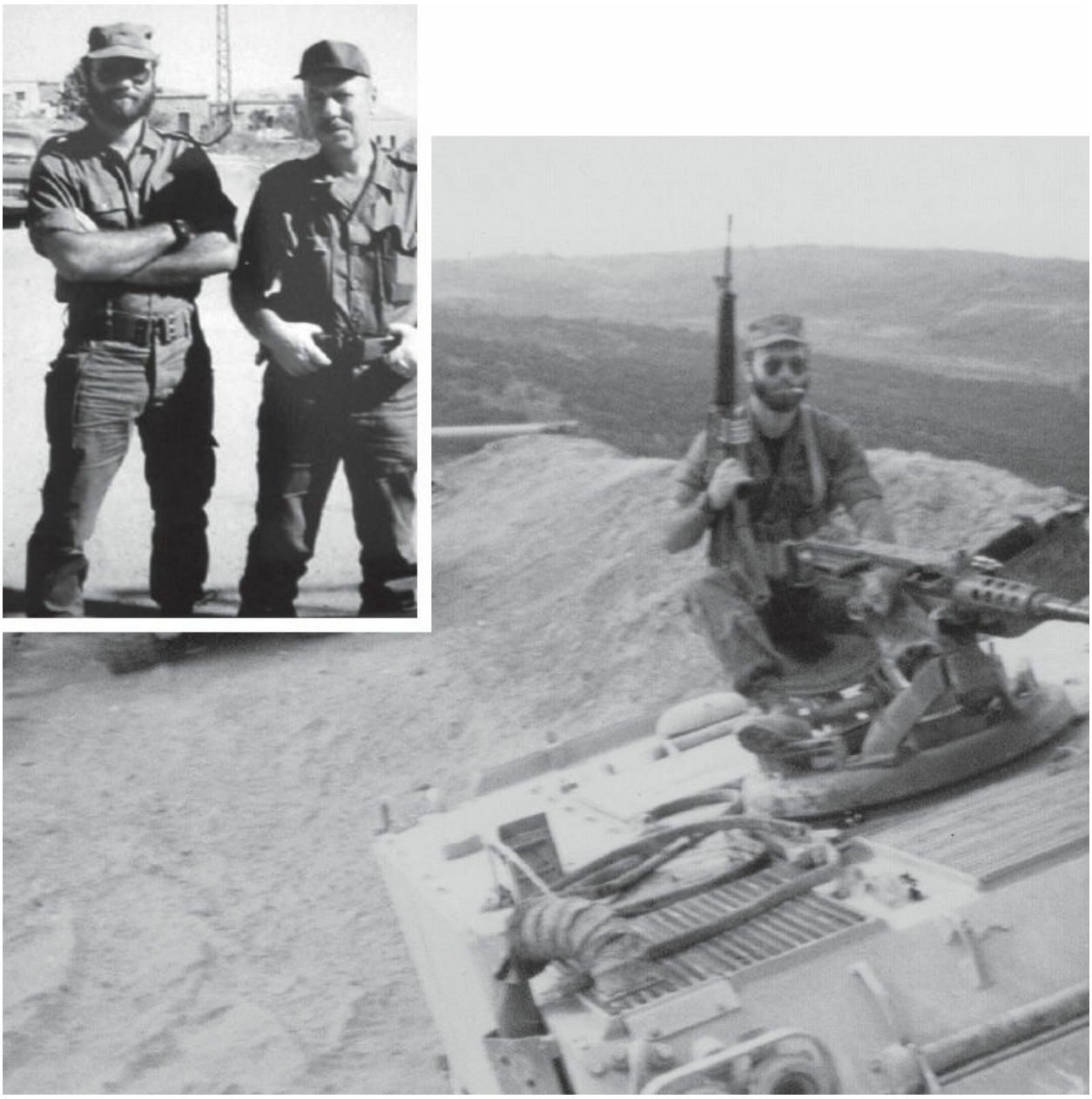
operations the first words out of his mouth were: “David. How is your Arabic coming ?” My other good friend, former French Legionnaire Maurice, had served in Algeria. Major Haddad hated Maurice and evidently had him arrested on trumped up charges, thrown in jail and then deported out of the country through the most dangerous route – the territory held by the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), Syrians and others who hated the SLA – back to Beirut. I’m pretty sure Maurice was grabbed by the PLO and executed. There was nothing I could do for him; it was out of my hands. Most Lebs had a real hatred for the French stemming from the colonial days.

After meeting Haddad I was returned to the small bunker where I fought off ants crawling over me all night long, before being transferred to the church barracks the next morning.

Later that day Joseph took me over to the IDF supply depot in the old fort/barracks and kitted me out in an IDF uniform and gave me an Israeli-made 7.62 FN with one magazine and 20 rounds. Seeing that, I hoped I wouldn’t get into a prolonged firefight any time soon. But, being me, always thinking ahead and looking for a opportunity to better equip myself, it wasn’t long before I was removing rounds from the ammo boxes in the APCs parked at remote outposts, and trading some personal items I didn’t need for extra magazines.

That’s when the all-night patrols with the M113 came along. That, and outpost duty, which I quite enjoyed. The Lebs hated it because it took them away from their families and eating, sleeping and screwing the days away.

I prefer the solitude. And, it gave me the opportunity to fire off a lot of 50 cal. rounds while perched atop our Sherman tank with its 75 mm turret gun ! Night duty also kept me away from – and possibly killing – the two giggling young militiamen who played footsie or whatever in the bunk alongside me as I tried to sleep. I’m just glad it was dark and I couldn’t see what they were up to. Anyway, the others forced into outpost duty were glad to do their part during the day even though it did include sitting in the hot, baking sun swatting the wasps that gathered around open olive cans, and the flies around the shit piles surrounded by empty IDF metal ammo boxes just outside the embankments of our dugout fortress with its little shed that served as our sleeping quarters.



McGrady sitting on a South Lebanese Army M113 along the borders with Hezbollah-dominated territory and left, with SLA commander Major Sa’ad Haddad. (Photos: Dave McGrady)

We had little or no water and what there was, was quite dirty. So, if you didn’t bring your own, that’s all you had. Towards evening, a militiaman might bring down a plastic container with some food, and we all ate out of it by hand. If not, there were IDF rations in cans, bags and squeeze tubes plus a box or so of oranges or bananas, all, of course, covered in insects.

The trip down to the outpost in an APC was rather nerve racking. During the night, insurgents would sneak around behind us and plant landmines on

the only two tracks down. A week before I arrived, two militiamen were killed when they ran over one. Part of the crater was still visible, along with parts of one wheel and shredded bits of bloodstained clothing. George, my APC driver, and his buddy drove me down to the outpost, stopping numerous times to check the dirt ahead of us for any disturbances.

We usually spent two weeks at a time at either Outpost 301 or 302. There was this crazy redheaded Leb at 301 who fired some 50 cal. rounds just over the heads of two of our guys atop the tank: they had been screwing around early in the morning firing into the valley below, interrupting his sleep. One of the Lebs at my outpost was just as crazy. I pointed out an old Arab with a walking stick picking his way slowly up the hill to our left about 80 yards away. Before I knew it, he had wheeled the Browning around and fired some rounds at him, all the while laughing and yelling, “Palestinian. Palestinian.” The man disappeared out of sight and I hoped he hadn’t been hit… someone who was probably just coming up from a day of fishing on the Litani River below.

A few days later we had an unexpected visitor while I was on watch at our outpost. I caught someone out of the corner of my eye walking towards us waving a small white piece of cloth. Didn’t know if this was a distraction for something bigger so did a quick scan of the area to see if I could pick out anything unusual: everything seemed normal. As he got closer I motioned with my hand for him to keep coming forward with his hands up while I kept my rifle trained on him. Only Mohammad and I were there; the rest had returned to Marjayoun for the day, which was allowed if they got permission beforehand and promised to be back before dark. I motioned to Mohammad who was standing near the Sherman below to get up on the 50 cal. while I remained on the dirt brim. After what seemed like hours the man finally made it up to us and from what we gathered, he was a Syrian surrendering to us. Now wasn’t that easy ? I found some gun cleaning cloth, tied his hands behind him, then guided him over to a spot in the shade of the tank before wrapping some of the cloth around his head to blindfold him. Mohammad got on the radio and called Major Haddad who arrived within the hour. After a brief, friendly conversation with the Syrian he was placed in Haddad’s jeep and off they went. But not before the major had congratulated us both… probably just happy we didn’t fall asleep on duty which is quite common at these remote outposts where boredom is the worse enemy, especially during the day.

As I said before, I prefer night duty. This particular night we were going to split up guard duty with everyone doing three hours apiece. At around 2 am, just before my stint ended, I heard a lot of what seemed like singing and yelling on the other side of a distant hill. Having no idea what was happening, I felt, to be on the safe side, I had better wake Tony, my English-speaking outpost commander who had served in the Lebanese Army around Beirut before joining Major Haddad. His response: get everyone else up and in a firing position. It turned out to be the right move. A few minutes later a RPG round flew over our heads and detonated in the rocks on the other side of us. I had no idea what the guy was firing at from down there; the only thing visible could have been the barrel of the 75 mm gun on the tank. Anyway, we let rip with everything, in all directions. We ended up sending rounds over the heads of the United Nations outpost way down in the valley, up towards Marjayoun, our headquarters, and everywhere else. I watched 50 cal. rounds bounce off rocks into space and tracer rounds set fires all over the surrounding landscape.

Well, the next day, orders came down from Major Haddad telling us to stop wasting ammo on ghost enemies. It seems we had upset the IDF who went into full panic or operational mode from their heavily fortified building in Marjayoun next to the old military barracks.

Which brings me to my next story. Tim and I were walking past that well-lit-up building one night on the way back to our barracks. We had no weapons on us and were walking right down the middle of the road, chatting. All of a sudden we hear all these bolts on weapons chambering rounds. Tim gets this terrified look on his face and says: “What should we do ?”

My quick response: “Nothing, just keep walking. They are fucking with us.”

That immature stunt just proved to me what assholes they can be when they think they’ve got the upper hand. Later on, I had another confrontation with a few that came out to my outpost in one of our APCs. Some red-booted Golani Brigade IDF airborne officers paid us a surprise visit on an inspection tour of the area. One suddenly realized I was an American. The first thing out of his mouth: “How much are you getting paid to do this ?”

I quickly shot back, “No more than anyone else here. Probably less.” Which was the truth. Anyway, those two instances alone turned me off to taking any personal risks to protect Israel. I brought the subject of Israel up with Major Haddad once, and he gave me the finger-across-the-throat

response. Now I know why.

Things could get interesting even at our barracks. I was laying on my cot taking a nap one afternoon after spending all night and part of the morning patrolling the countryside in our APC when all of a sudden I was rocked by a big explosion nearby. I didn't hear any incoming so I had no idea what was going on. I could hear a lot of yelling and chaos as I exited the building. Everyone was headed to a small field to my right, so I followed. There I saw four men carrying this older Leb up to a car by his arms and legs like a sack of potatoes. He was covered in blood and had small holes all over his clothing. I looked back to where he had come from, to see a small cooking fire and a coffee pot on its side. I learned later that he had decided to take a break from his farm work and started a fire to make coffee… and in the process, had set off a mine.

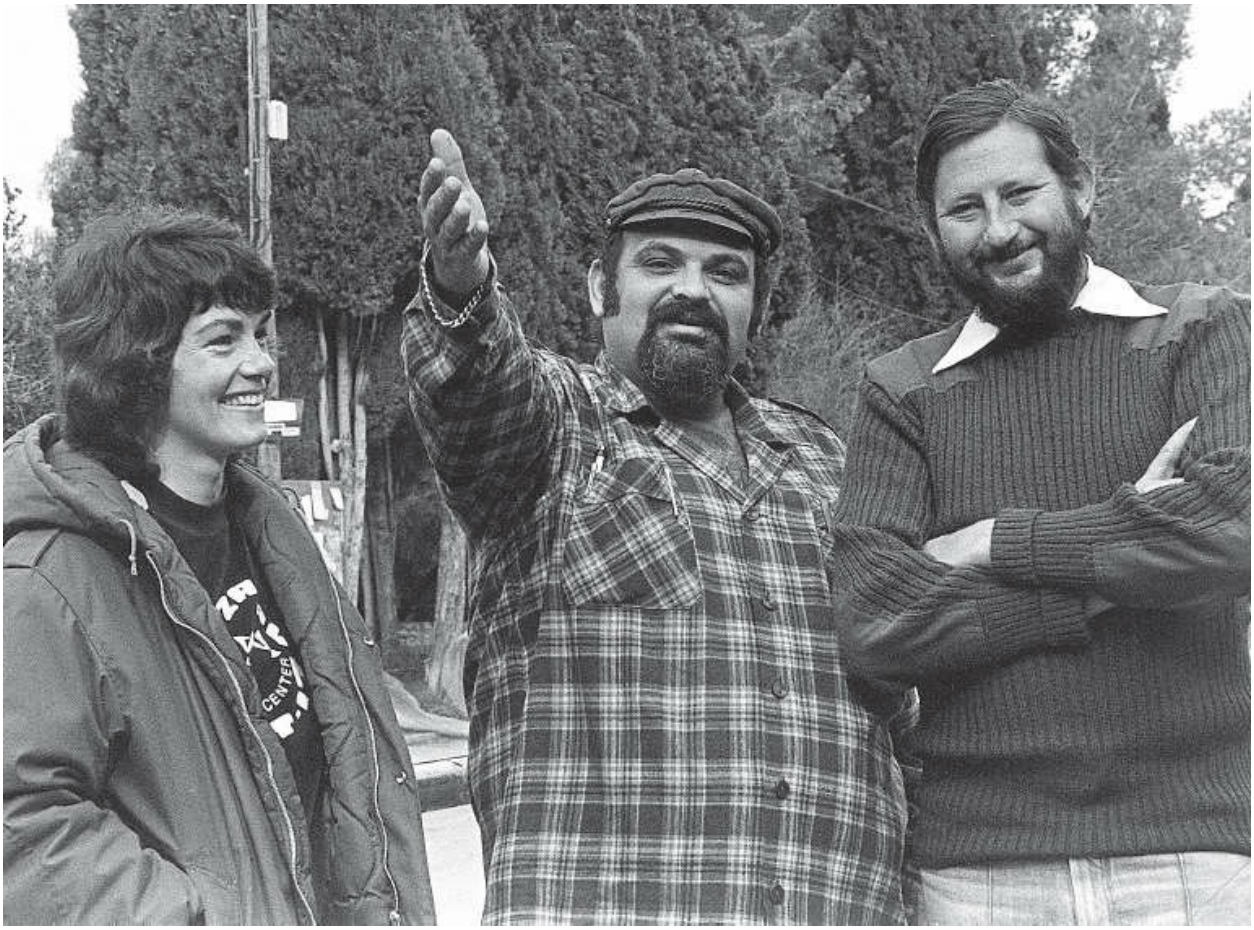
Two days later I was at the border post and the customs officer told me they had pumped a lot of blood into him but he still died. "We tell the Lebanese not to burn their fields or walk around in them because there is a lot of unexploded ordnance under the surface from previous fighting. But they don't listen and that's the result," he said.

Major Haddad learned quickly that I'm a wanderer, always on the go. He would see me here one moment and in an entirely different place miles away an hour or so later. He'd give me that surprised look, then a big smile.

Every so often Haddad would remind me that he was still trying to get my .45 Colt Commander released from customs in Tel Aviv and shipped up to him in Lebanon. However, I decided it was time to bid farewell to the SLA and return to the US for a while before researching and heading out to a different conflict. But first I needed to stop the transfer of my sidearm. So, off I went to the IDF HQ in Metulla.

I made my way up to the radio room where I convinced the cute IDF gals to assist me in contacting customs. Once that was accomplished and I had put a stop on the transfer, I walked out into the hallway only to run into Major Haddad and a bunch of IDF officers coming out of a meeting room. He smiled and said hello and went on his merry way. An hour later, as I was walking down the street by the Arazim Hotel, I noticed him alone with a nicely dressed man. He waved me over and introduced me to George Ottis, owner of the Christian Radio Station "Good Hope" inside Southern Lebanon and located below Marjayoun in the valley.

I wanted to see a few things in the area before returning home. After I finished that, and nearing the border crossing, here comes Major Haddad in his jeep. Seeing me, a big smile came across his face; he waved and continued on. I can only imagine what he was thinking: “That crazy American,” would probably be accurate.



The author and his wife inside Lebanese territory with the Israeli Colonel Yoram Hamizrachi, whose brainchild it was to establish the SLA as a buffer and use Lebanese combatants to counter insurgency in Southern Lebanon. (Photo: Author)

Major Haddad was like me in that way. One never knew where he was going to pop up. Late one night we were parked in the mountains in the APC keeping an eye on things and all of a sudden his driver pulls up in the jeep. The major first greeted Joseph, our commander, and then me, before disappearing into the night again. He paid no attention to the other foreigners in the APC.

So it didn’t surprise me to see Haddad coldly dish Tim while we were at

his home when he attempted to give the major a photo of himself standing with his army buddies in Canada. Major Haddad took a quick look at it and gave it back to him, which was quite a blow to his ego.

Major Haddad took a number of photos with me during the time I was there… standing very close. When Tim attempted the same with Major Haddad or Joseph, they backed away, to keep their distance. I have to admit, even though I somewhat liked him, Tim was a bit weird. One of the young Lebs busted his nose in a fight after Tim told him the knife he was carrying was junk.

The night before I departed Lebanon, that same Leb showed up in our room with a spray can and started spraying something in Arabic all over the walls. I'm quite sure he was doing it because I was leaving and he wanted to mock Tim, who was standing just feet away, while I was present. I can only imagine the hell Tim went through after I left.

We had another American join us a week before I departed. The Lebs treated him almost as badly. They didn't hide their hatred towards him as a US Army vet. That's one label I never wore, so they looked at me in an entirely different light… more or less as one of them.

Anyway, we were sitting in Joseph's house one evening and he jumps up, grabs my FN, then motions Joe to stand up and hold it in a standing firing position. I knew what was coming.

Joseph yells something at him in Arabic, grabs the rifle and jams it hard into his shoulder. Probably saying something along the lines of, "You were doing it wrong soldier boy, now that's the right way."

Tim got the same treatment one day after he tried to tell a Leb on our APC how to properly load the 30 cal. Browning. That went over like a lead balloon. So, let that be a warning to foreigners going it alone with their previous background in another country's military service. You're going to be tested and treated like crap. Locals want to show you they are in charge and you're not as good as you think you are when you're not around with your military buddies serving as back-up. That applies particularly if *your* country at one time or another has attacked, invaded or occupied *their* country. Having long memories, they don't forget or forgive.

Joseph, my APC commander, and I got along really well. He liked the US military camo fatigues I had brought along. Kept asking if he could have a set. I finally relented after I received my IDF fatigues. He didn't like the

baggy look so he took them to a tailor and had them custom-fitted. A week later he was proudly showing them to me. The jacket was shortened to waist-high and fitted snugly, as did the pants. From that point on, besides his Leb crew, I was the only one allowed to sit on the cupola cover or stand in the hole behind the 50 cal. when we were on the move.

Occasionally, to break the boredom, we went to Leb weddings and gettogethers. Sometimes our Israeli liaison officer also attended: he'd get right up there and dance with the Lebs. Other times Tim and I would visit local Lebs in their homes for a question and answer session that felt more like an interrogation. Or just to drink some arak hard liquor, get a little wasted, sing, beat on a drum and attempt to dance.

Those in our immediate area could be trusted. Those deserting from the Lebanese Army in Beirut, not so much. Four showed up unexpectedly at our barracks one afternoon. They walked in on Tim and I lounging around in our room. One started a conversation in broken English with me while another swiped Tim's candy bar off the table and slipped it into his pocket. He saw me watching him do it, but I wasn't about to make a stink over a candy bar that could get us both killed.

This took place as I was starting to pack my suitcases with some things I had picked up over the last six months to bring home as souvenirs. I still had one set of American camos I wanted to trade. The man I was talking to said he had IDF tank overalls. I wanted to see them first so I hopped in the back seat of their small car. The two big Lebs climbed in, one on either side of me. I thought: This might not have been a good idea. Kidnapping for money was just starting to take hold in our area. Expensive cars were already being stolen from Beirut and hidden down south for resale.

Well, I couldn't do anything about it now. Just hope for the best. We drove to this house on the outskirts of Marjayoun. Inside, the Leb pulled the military overalls from a floor chest and took out his lighter to show me the overalls wouldn't burn. I turned the fatigues over to him, shook hands, then told him I needed to get back immediately because Major Haddad was expecting me in a meeting. Which of course, was a lie.

I knew, as they did, that Major Haddad was very respected and feared in the area by all, so I was confident they'd they get me back in a timely manner. I had them drop me in front of Haddad's home, and when they left, I walked down to our barracks a block away.

This brings me to the story about a lucky hit on Haddad's jeep. One night

someone fired a few mortar rounds at his home that scattered the IFD guards. One round landed right on his jeep parked on the road across from his home, sending up a fireball and totally destroying it.

Our own barracks were hit by Katyusha rockets before I arrived. They sent Tim fleeing back inside the church, where he was found cowering in a corner afterwards.

I was told that Nuef, a young Muslim who bunked in one of the rooms down from mine, came running along the road past the church laughing his ass off while the rocket barrage continued. He was a crazy one. He found this missile with wires hanging out of it that hadn't detonated. He painted it up to make it look pretty, took it back to his room and put it on a small table next to his cot.

One of the two young Brits bunking down in the room across from me said I needed to see what Nuef was keeping in his room. After he left we walked into his room and I observed the unexploded missile. I said: "I'll have a talk with Major Haddad", which I did, and he sent someone by to pick it up. Nuef wondered where it went and all of us played stupid.

I was kidding around with him one day before he was about to go on outpost duty in the valley below us. I said: "When you get down there tonight, fire a few rounds off in this direction at such-and-such a time to let us know you're there." He was more then happy to oblige.

Well, that time came, give or take a few minutes, and sure enough we hear this pop, pop, pop and tracer rounds flew right over our heads as we ducked down behind the wall in front of the church. They hit the vacant house out the back and further up the hill.

That's how we entertained ourselves: doing crazy shit. One Leb ordered Tim to shoot a canteen off the top of his head with an FN. He told Tim that if he didn't do it, he'd shoot him. So Tim did it.

Nuef enjoyed running off to Haifa every so often to get a little action from the whores there. One day I hear laughing and someone running around outside my window. I looked out and there was Nuef doing a victory dance with panties pulled down over his head.

We got all our water from a large concrete square tub outside. We used it for drinking – which gave us terrible gut cramps – and for washing. Just dunking a bucket and then pouring the water on ourselves. Well, someone

left their bar soap near the water, Nuef saw it and went nuts. Jumping up there, he pissed in the water to show us he didn't appreciate someone washing and then leaving soap near the water he drank. Point taken.

After I left Lebanon I started to miss it. Six months later I wrote Major Haddad requesting permission to return. His reply: "You'll always be one of us, so no permission required." I informed him that as soon as I could get the airfare saved up, I'd be on my way.
His reply: "I can help in that regard. Here's a name and phone number of a city councilman I consider a very good friend. Contact him and he will purchase the ticket for you. We await your return." So, I did that.

I was in the process of sending him some travel info when it came over the news that Israel had now invaded Southern Lebanon in a major military operation. They immediately captured the PLO-occupied mountain fortress of Beaufort Castle and were making their way north towards Beirut. That ended that and I had no further communication with Major Haddad.

However Tim wrote me a final letter saying they weren't involved in the operation and now the SLA were giving out captured AK-47s like candy. Tim had got a letter of recommendation from Major Haddad and was now getting ready to leave southern Lebanon for his home in Canada, he wrote.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROFILE OF A MERCENARY: FIJIAN WARRIOR FRED MARAFONO

The first time I met Fred was when Neall Ellis put his Hind down at Freetown's Lungi International Airport. The Mi-24's side door opened and a powerful man with a wild mop of hair stepped down onto the tarmac. "Name's Fred," he said, "Fred Marafono… welcome to Sierra Leone."

He grabbed my bags and without formality, hurled them into the chopper. My aluminum camera case still has a huge dent in the side from connecting with one of the steel ammo boxes.

"Hop in," he urged with a wave of a muscular arm. I did, skidding over the thousand or so cartridge shells that almost covered the floor of helicopter.

"Sorry about that," he said with a wicked smile. "Had a few problems earlier on… but we dealt with them."

Only after we had landed at Cockerill army barracks on the outskirts of the capital did somebody else explain that it hadn't been quite so simple. Neall Ellis had taken the chopper into a prearranged target and the reception was, as he put it, *hot*. They did several strikes, circling the objective in broad circles – as was always Neall's custom – using the chopper's 12.7 mm Gatling as well as its entire stock of rockets to blast an extremely well-defended "gook" gathering point.

Throughout the engagement, which apparently only lasted three or four minutes, Fred used his GPMG with abandon, stopping only briefly to let his furiously smoking barrel cool down. Not one to talk about this kind of work, he let others who were with him on the gunship explain the details.

I also had to find out from his friends that a short while before I'd arrived,

he had received word that his wife's parents were under threat. He'd married a local girl, a lot younger than he was at the time, and her folks lived in the village deep in the jungle interior of this West African country.

He had to do something, he admitted, and, had he pushed hard enough, he could probably have got his South African pilot pal to fly the gunship into the area and extricate his extended family. Instead, he gathered together a bunch of Kamajor bush fighters – with whom he had already seen a lot of action – and despite a large rebel presence, they fought their way to the village, loaded the family and their belongings onto a truck and beat a fast retreat back to the coast.

Fred did tell me afterwards that his success was partly due to the fact that nobody expected him to do anything quite as bold. As he phrased it, he was in and out of there "faster than anybody could close a shithouse door." His fighters took no serious casualties, though one of the guys was lightly wounded. Fred did concede to killing "a lot of those fuckers" during the course of that rescue mission.

Kauata Vamarasi (Fred) Marafono – the ultimate tribal warrior – was born on the Fijian island of Rotuman on December 13, 1940. His father had served in the British Army in Burma during World War II.

It was no surprise to many of his friends that when a British Army recruiting team arrived in Fiji, he signed up, later admitting that the decision was "an impulse. I was young and that was it… hadn't even told my folks. When I got word that I'd be leaving for Britain the next day, I called my parents and my mother cried."

In Britain the youthful Fred Marafono joined the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, serving as a corporal for several years. When he applied with 90 others to join the Special Air Service, only six – including Marafono – passed the rigorous selection course. According to his obituary notice in London's *Daily Telegraph* (Marafono died in 2013), his 21-year career with B Squadron, 22 SAS, included service in Borneo, Aden, Oman, Northern Ireland and the Falklands.



Fijian national and former member of Britain's crack SAS Fred Marafono with one of his favourite toys onboard a Sierra Leone Air Wing Mi-17. (Photo: *Daily Telegraph*)

"Some idea of the nature of some of his engagements can be gleaned from the fate of a fellow Fijian in the SAS, Sergeant Talaiasi Labalaba, who was killed in the battle of Mirbat in Oman in 1972, when nine SAS men fought for their lives against an attack by some 250 communist guerrillas. Sergeant Labalaba had been best man at Marafono's wedding," the *Telegraph* reported.

Following his discharge from the SAS with the rank of Warrant Officer I, but not before he was awarded an MBE in 1983, he was recruited by British Special Forces specialist David Stirling to work in security in Africa, in large part because his abilities as a visual tracker were legendary. While with the SAS he was conceivably the leading expert in this field.

He was also one of the first "locals" recruited by the South African mercenary group Executive Outcomes when the Sierra Leone civil war was at its worst. Appointed a ground force commander, leading and training elements of the Sierra Leone army, Fred Marafono headed an assault – with chopper gunship support – on the major diamond-producing town of Gandorhun, 50 miles southwest of Bo.

Months later Koidu and the diamond-bearing areas were back in government hands.

Neall Ellis has many stories about the legendary Fred. One of the worst experiences that he and his team lived to talk about afterwards took place in January 1999. That was when the rebels were making a concerted push toward Freetown. They had already reached Waterloo, barely 10 miles from Hastings, Freetown's second airport. If they achieved a breakthrough there, their chances of reaching the city proper were much improved.

Clearly, there would have been very little standing in their way because the regular army – such as it was – was already overextended.

Indeed, it was touch and go for several days. The extent of the fighting can be gauged from the fact that the contingent from the Republic of Guinea, Sierra Leone's neighbor, had deployed a squadron of Soviet-built T-54/55 tanks and these were almost overrun.

Nellis reckons that from the start it was a hard fight to keep the place and both sides took heavy casualties.

"I was called upon to haul an ammunition re-supply to a battalion from the Guinea Republic and though fighting was severe, there was no arguing. What it meant was taking my chopper – an Mi-17 Hip – into a dicey situation about which no one could tell me anything. Added to that, I could speak no French and the Guineans couldn't, or possibly wouldn't, comprehend any English. Looking back, it was a recipe for disaster," he remembers.

"I asked for a sitrep on what the rebels were doing. Headquarters came back on the radio and said that all was 'Charlie Charlie'… in other words, cool and calm."

At this point Nellis laughed nervously and continued: "My experience over previous weeks was that when anybody reported cool and calm it meant that their faces were cool from the wind while running away from battle and calm came when whoever was doing the reporting got to an area where there was no fighting !"

Normally Nellis and his crew had a Guinean liaison officer named Benson who spoke English and French and who flew with them whenever the Air Wing resupplied positions held by Conakry's soldiers. On that day, though, when he suggested that the interpreter go with them, Benson suddenly found a dozen excuses for not flying, including having to see his dentist. "I smelt a

rat," Nellis recalled.

"So we took off, anyway; I had Fred on board and Mohammed, a part-time side gunner who usually went along for the ride. The Hip was loaded to the max with ammunition and I had a nagging suspicion that something was not quite right. Still, we couldn't ignore that they'd said it was fine and who knows, perhaps it was."

Nellis knew that fairly often government troops working in the interior were not always as forthright as they might have been while under attack. "They would be cagey about the real situation, which might give them a better chance of getting what they had asked for," explained the South African pilot. "Fred suggested that that was possibly to be expected."

Nellis was more forthright. It was his view that they were exposed to real danger on just about every flight, and that it wasn't necessary to compound issues by lying. In this case, though, it was a short hop across the hills. Anyway, he had been into that particular LZ before without problems. They'd be in and out before anybody knew they'd arrived, at least, that was what he hoped.

The problem with Waterloo was that it lay between a succession of hills, so there was only one route in and out of the place, and that was directly over the town itself. "If the rebels were in the area – as we expected them to be – there would be a tough reception."

An interesting sidelight to the sortie was that a short while before, the crew had to fork out their own money to buy new flying helmets, which was fine because they were state-of-the-art Gentex and had come from an American PMC working in the country, ICI of Oregon. In contrast, if it had been government money, they would probably have gotten cheaper models. Nellis found that while the new helmets were the best things that had happened since the invention of the hamburger, they tended to deaden external noise, especially the cracks of bullets passing close by.

"The sound of a near-miss is quite distinctive," he said, describing it as being a bit like a room full of typists madly banging away at their machines.



Fred Marafono often flew under the front bubble of the Hind gunship when he went operational with Neall Ellis in Sierra Leone. Most times he was required to handle one of the GPMGs in the rear. (Photo: Author's collection)

"This time, on short finals, I heard the sound of firing, but I wasn't too sure because Gentex helmets are super-efficient. I asked Fred if the rebels were shooting at us. In reply to what was obviously a very stupid question – we could see the bastards running around all over the place with their AK's pointing at us – Fred's answer was: 'No Nellis, it's the radio crackling.' "

At least someone on the helicopter had a sense of humor, Nellis says today.

"There was no going back, especially with three tons of ammo on board. So it was a question of ignoring incoming and concentrating on getting the old girl's wheels onto the ground."

As the South African tells it, the surface of the LZ had been churned into a fine powder by Guinean tanks, which wasn't helped by a helicopter coming into the hover. The rotors kicked up a brownout, which was both good and bad: Nellis couldn't see a thing, but neither could the enemy. Once down, nobody showed up to help the crew unload.



A relaxed Fred Marafono on the beach near Freetown during a few off-duty moments in Sierra Leone. (Photo: Cassie Nel)

Everybody around them was in the throes of a fierce exchange of fire, Fred Marafono and his side-gunner buddy included, and none of the troops would leave their trenches to help.

"After a while a couple of soldiers did come up and they gave Fred and Mohammed a hand, but it was tense," continued Nellis.

"Again, one of my fears was that we'd be hit by an RPG. So I kept the rotors going and anyway, dust was what we needed just then to obscure our goings-on from the people who were firing at us. In any other circumstance, we'd have made a damn good target."

Getting the load away took longer than the crew would have liked and the fact that it was mostly ammo didn't make it any easier. It was Fred's view at the time that had any of it taken a tracer, "we'd all have been vaporized"

Also, says Nellis, “everybody onboard was blinded by the fine dust that the rotors whipped up. We were worried, too, that somebody would walk into our tail rotor. If that happened we wouldn’t have been able to fly out, not with damaged tail rotor blades.”

Once that task was finished, Nellis again had to pass through a vicious curtain of small arms fire to get clear. Fred, meanwhile, kept doing his own thing out of one of the ports at the back, including dropping a rebel armed with an RPG pointed at the helicopter.

“We were flying through transition and moving relatively slowly,” remembered Nellis. “He slotted the bastard just as he was about to pull the trigger.” It must have been close…

CHAPTER EIGHT

BATTLE FOR SOYO: MERCENARY HISTORY IN THE MAKING[1]

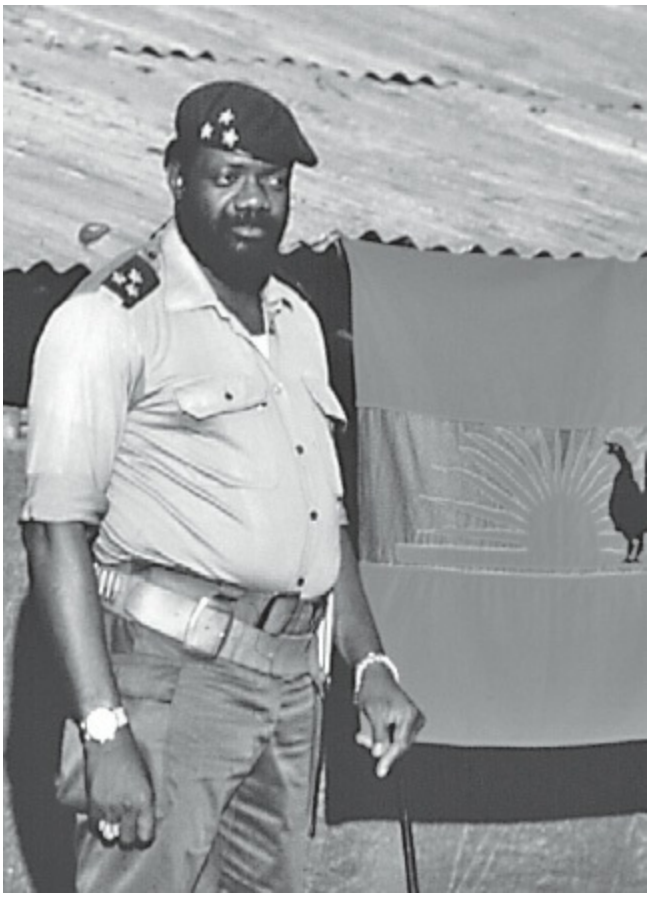
"Executive Outcomes gave us this stability. In a perfect world of course, we wouldn't need an organization like EO, but I'd be loath to say that they'd have to go just because they're mercenaries."

Canadian General Ian Douglas, Negotiator for the United Nations

The Bedrock on which the reputation of Executive Outcomes was built came from what is now known as the "Battle for Soyo" This eight-week operation for the Soyo oil installation at the mouth of the Congo River in Angola's far north lasted from early March to the end of April 1993.

It was fought against a rebel movement, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)[2]. In the process, three South Africans lost their lives, though everybody who stayed the distance was hit at least once, some a dozen times over. Quite a few of the men suffered life-threatening wounds, a few of them injured seriously enough to be evacuated to hospitals abroad. In contrast, the rebel group lost several hundred men, including two of their top field commanders.

As a consequence of that tough, resilient action, the Luanda government liked what it saw. It was impressed by a group of men who, until a very short time before, had been their hated enemy. An equivalent gesture might have been an American Ranger Battalion fighting for Hanoi at the end of the Vietnam War. Further, these South Africans were dead serious: among their number were those who were prepared to put their lives at serious risk in order to achieve what they said they would.



The rebel guerrilla leader Jonas Savimbi – he commanded the anti-government UNITA movement – was the most significant force opposed by South African mercenaries at the historic battle of Soyo. (Photo: Author's collection)

Almost immediately, the Angolan Government hired 500 more of these former veterans for an estimated $40 million a year and Executive Outcomes was on the map.

The job, according to the deal signed by company representatives in Luanda, was to train 5,000 Angolan troops in both counter-insurgency and conventional military warfare and the contract was to last from September 1993 to January 1996. At the same time Angola bought numbers of T-54/55 main battle tanks as well as a hundred brand new BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles from Moscow.

The air component to support these operations included MiG-23 and Sukhoi jet fighter/bombers, Pilatus PC-7 and PC-9 ground support aircraft (with underwing rocket pods) as well as Hind Mi-24 helicopter gunships and Hip multi-role transport choppers. All flew under the banner of the Angolan Air Force.

The arrival in Angola of EO, a small Pretoria security company with no previous record of any kind of military activity, happened to coincide with the lifting of the international arms embargo on the Luanda government. Ultimately, in a series of military adventures that spanned almost the entire country, the company was finally instrumental in forcing the Swiss-educated, Mao-espousing Dr Jonas Savimbi to the negotiating table.

But it was Soyo that set the scene for this to take place. There, at one of Angola's principal oil facilities – perched precariously on the south shore of the estuary of Africa's greatest river – the scene was set for a force of 40 men (and often fewer than half that number) to fight a series of battles against a hugely preponderant UNITA guerrilla army numbering more than 1,000. What made the event significantly different from previous Angolan military exploits in its ongoing war against UNITA was that almost all of EO's fighters had formerly been members of South African Defence Force (SADF) elite Special Forces units.

Having been airlifted into Soyo by Mi-8 helicopters in what should have been a surprise attack, this tiny but "highly effective work force" – as the company later phrased it – battled for the duration to hold on to the oil facility and the military base guarding it and eventually also to take the nearby ancillary port of Kwanza. The ordeal developed into an immense test of endurance, guts, improvisation and tactics as the South Africans countered everything that the rebels could throw at them.

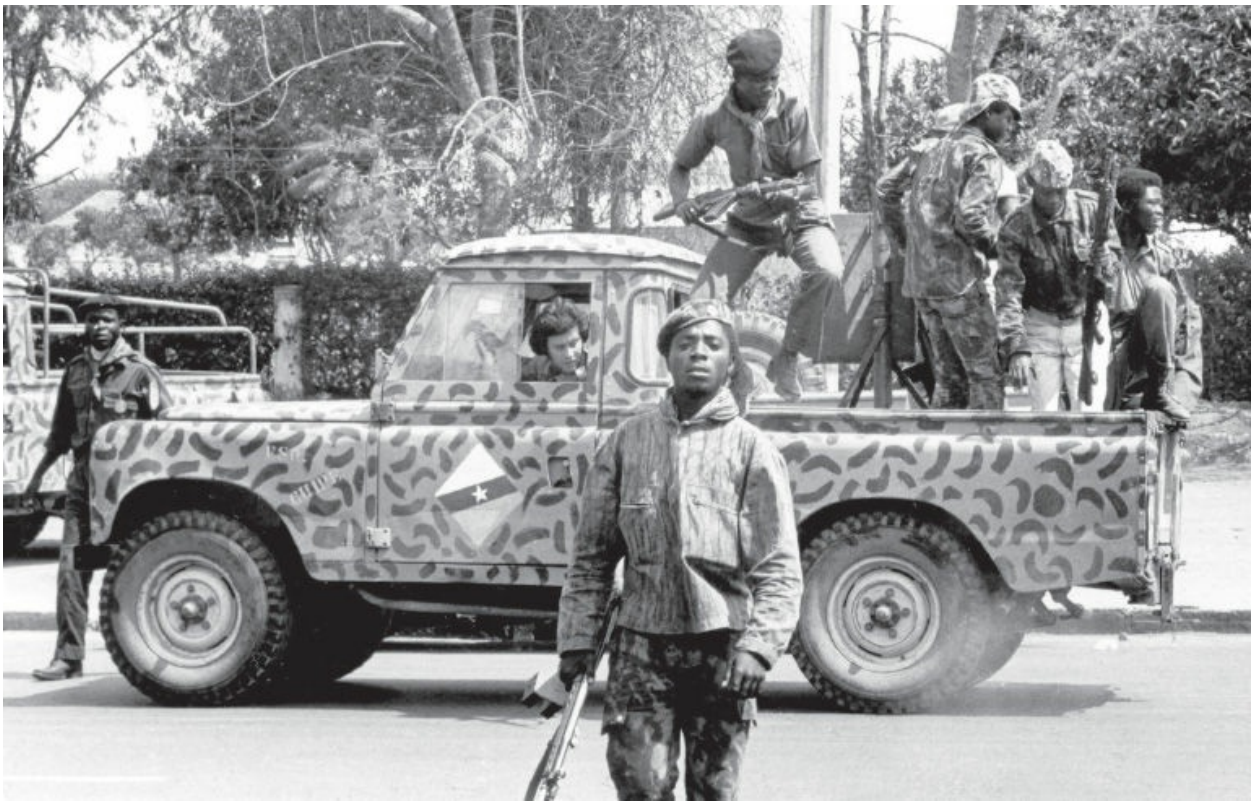
There were days – and nights, especially – when UNITA would send its irregulars in relays often hundreds strong, four and sometimes six times in a row.

To the sound of whistles blown by their commanders they would go in screaming "*Avante ! Avante !*" and the fighting would continue for an hour or two. The rebels would withdraw and the next batch would follow a short while later. Though the guerrillas attacked, probed, shelled, rocketed, mortared and regularly threw themselves at the defenders in numbers and sometimes managed to get to within yards of EO's defense perimeter, the tiny Executive Outcomes squad held on. As former Reconnaissance Regiment Major Lafras Luitingh was to comment years later: "We were able to contain it all OK, but believe me, only just… it could as easily have gone the other way…"

It didn't help either that many of the UNITA regulars battling the South African perimeter were originally attached to Savimbi's own Special Forces,

the brazenly bold *Groupos de Bate*. Nor that this accomplished and experienced unit had been fighting the Angolan Army for years and had originally been trained by South African insurgency specialists in the days when Pretoria was still at war with Luanda.

Though the Angolan Army[3], the FAA, offered some help (one of its tanks was brought ashore to bolster EO defenses) many government troops had no training whatsoever. Indeed, only after it was over was it established that most of these youths had been shanghaied off the streets of Luanda, put into uniform and had an AK thrust into their hands. Without further ado they were then promptly shipped off to the front. At the first sign of a UNITA attack many of them would slink off into the jungle, sometimes doffing their uniforms and dropping their weapons as they did so. They would only return to the base when the odors wafting through the undergrowth told them that food was being prepared.



Before Executive Outcomes arrived in Angola there were numerous mercenary units active, including the FNLA-linked Chipa Esqadrao, which the author joined as a combatant in order to get his story. This was one of the photos he took while he operated out of Nova Lisboa, soon to be renamed Huambo.

Though their officers shot them out of hand if they were caught – there

were about 50 FAA soldiers executed that way, the majority by Colonel Pepe de Castro himself (who otherwise stayed well away from any actual hostilities) – the South African defenders accepted very early on that an unwilling soldier was invariably more of a hindrance than help.

Then, once the fighting had ended and the South Africans pulled out – with the oil facility again in government hands – Executive Outcomes signed a formal agreement with the Angolans and over the next two years a lot more battles followed. This included the eventual recapture of Angola's diamond fields at Cafunfo (one of the largest diamondiferous pipes in the world and dealt with later in this book) and the ousting of Savimbi and his command structure from many of the major centers in the border regions adjacent to Zaire.

Through it all, the reputation of this tough, resolute band of South Africans mercenaries hardly ever faltered, even though there were times when there was dissention within their ranks in regard to their actual purpose in the war. Quite a few of those who signed on the dotted line had no idea of the intensity of the hostilities that awaited them once they reached Angola.



UNITA was given a variety of weapons by the United States to counter the military efforts of the Marxist MPLA government, including Jeep-mounted recoilless guns. (Photo sourced to David Mannell)

In fact, the link was further cemented when, halfway through the Angolan campaign, EO's management was approached by an embattled Sierra Leone government to do something similar with its escalating insurrection rapidly spiraling out of control.

After accepting a contract price of "about $25 million," almost 200 men were sent to Freetown, again at very short notice. With that, company personnel – this time using their own weapons and helicopters – set about hammering Foday Sankoh's RUF rebels into submission wherever they encountered them.

Not everybody was happy with the way all this came about. For many of the critics of the kind of activity which Executive Outcomes by now quite blatantly propagated, wrote David Shearer in his substantive prognosis on the use of mercenaries, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, the South African "guns-for-hire" organization represented the unacceptable face of mercenary activity[4].

Yet, added Shearer, while EO was condemned in liberal circles, the firm proved in the few years it remained active that it could "create a climate for peace and stability for foreign investment, focusing chiefly on military training [that included] a particular emphasis on Special Forces and clandestine warfare." Shearer reckoned that it also saw "a role for itself in peacekeeping (persuasion) services and was prepared to buy equipment appropriate to a client's needs."

Not for nothing did EO describe itself in its promotional literature as a company with a "solid history of success." Interestingly, as history has proved, it was on the basis of what this unconventional South African group achieved in West Africa that many of the private military companies (PMCs) were to set up business in Iraq, and not long afterwards, in Afghanistan.

Executive Outcomes began its business innocuously enough by handling private security back at its home base in Pretoria. Its founder, Eeben Barlow, originally qualified as a sapper in the SADF Engineer Corps where he trained in mines and advanced explosives warfare. From there he was posted to 32 Battalion, one of the more aggressive South African units in the Angolan War

that made something of a specialty in the use of unconventional methods of warfare.

White-officered, most of its members were disaffected Angolans who, having fought against the Marxist MPLA in a protracted civil war, ended up in exile in present-day Namibia (formerly the League of Nations mandate, South West Africa).

After South Africa's 21 years of border conflicts came to an end in the late 1980s, Barlow did unspecified work in a covert South African Defence Force unit called the Civil Cooperation Bureau, or CCB. Only after he'd resigned from that clandestine force did he and his partners establish Executive Outcomes, which operated as a normal security concern involved in private and corporate protection in a country where crime had become endemic following Nelson Mandela's election as president. Under Barlow's tenure, EO managed to recruit several weighty clients, among them the mining conglomerate Anglo American Corporation.

What happened next is regarded by some of those involved with EO in its earlier days more as a fortuitous turn of events than anything that might have been planned.

While with the CCB, Barlow became fairly well known to British Intelligence and he, in turn, became familiar with some of their operators. His role within the apartheid-era secret group was the opening of both local and foreign front companies to be used in the kind of furtive work with which CCB was then embroiled. He was also charged with handling clandestine bank accounts for these firms, some of which had links to South African sanctions-busting operations. Because of apartheid, the United Nations had imposed an arms embargo on South Africa.

With EO innocuously on the map in South Africa, Angola just then was having serious military problems of its own, with Savimbi's guerrilla force managing to extend its influence throughout the country. At that stage already, UNITA dominated all but the major urban centers. It had yet to penetrate secure security swathes around the main cities of Luanda and Lobito and it was the guerrilla strike on Soyo that eventually changed all that.

Though not the biggest of Angola's oil exporting facilities, Soyo represented an asset of vital importance to a number of oil companies operating in Angola at the time. These included Italy's Fina, Elf of France and Texaco, one of the American oil giants, all of which – including Sonangol, Angola's nationalized oil company – used Soyo as a logistics base

for their offshore operations. There was also Ranger Oil West Africa (ROWAL), a joint venture between Ranger and Heritage. With the rebels holding Soyo, all oil shipments from there came to halt. In consequence, Luanda was hurting financially.

One item that fell into the hands of the guerrillas was the prototype of a rotating buoy being tried out by ROWAL. An extremely complex and expensive item worth “several million dollars,” its owners wanted it back. Thus, through a series of intermediaries, ROWAL’s directors made a formal approach to UNITA’s representatives in Paris and asked whether permission could be requested from Dr Savimbi to have the buoy returned.

The reply came back from Africa almost immediately: a very determined “No”. The portly guerrilla leader was in no mind to help his enemy balance its books and he said as much. He had the buoy. He was keeping it, was the gist of the message

Enter Tony Buckingham, a former SAS operator-turned-oil entrepreneur who had links to London’s Heritage Oil and Gas[4]. According to Luitingh, Barlow’s partner in EO, Buckingham – astute as they come in this kind of business – was (and still is) extremely well connected in Britain, Westminster included. The gist of it was that he had come up with a solution to defeat UNITA.

By then, Buckingham had already been in contact with the Angolans in Luanda, where he approached Joaquim David, head of Sonangol, to do something about getting the buoy back. David replied that he couldn’t authorize anything to do with the military and suggested that he talk personally with Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos, which Buckingham did. That this British operator was able to gain access to the notoriously reclusive dos Santos – and at such short notice – says a good deal both for his influence and tenacity, even though he had done a number of successful deals in the country in the past.

Together with a group of military advisors, the President listened to what Buckingham had to say. The argument that he presented centered on the possibility of hurling back UNITA’s forces at Soyo and recapturing the oil terminal. That done, he suggested, their joint aims would have been achieved: he would get back his buoy and Luanda would again dominate the high ground at Soyo. Buckingham was promptly given $1 million to prepare a feasibility study.

Once back in London, Buckingham contacted some of his former SAS pals and suggested that there was good money to be made if they were to help him launch an operation to effect retrieval. It would be a short, snappy operation, he said, perhaps accomplished over a weekend. He also disclosed that the Angolan President had confided that the facility was lightly guarded.

It didn't take long for his old Hereford friends to give him a thumbs-down. The proposal was absurd, they told him. Having studied the implications of what the venture would entail and spoken to individuals familiar with the region, they told him the project wasn't just unfeasible, but the mission was suicidal. Elaborating, they explained that with the Atlantic Ocean fringing the area on one side and, right next to it, the Congo, the second largest river in the world, even getting in there would be difficult. Coupled to that, there was triple canopy jungle just about everywhere else. Even moving about the area off-road was difficult: the grass was eight feet tall and there were swamps everywhere.

So, his friends argued, should things go wrong, escape, while not impossible, would be, as Anglos like to say, dicey. EO was to discover to its chagrin later that whoever made that initial study was spot-on.

Having established the parameters in Angola, Buckingham flew to South Africa to talk to another old contact from the past, Larny Keller, an SADF colonel from the apartheid era and just then involved in developing night vision equipment with Eloptro. It was Keller who brought Eeben Barlow's EO into the picture. By now Buckingham had also linked up with another of his military friends, former British Army Captain Simon Mann. This was the same Simon Mann who in mid-2004 was to find himself incarcerated in Zimbabwe's Chikurubi Prison with 60-something like-minded mercenaries after organizing a botched coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea.



Daniel Chipenda, leader of Chipa Esquadrao was originally a senior MPLA commander before and his group of fighters linked up with the Western-orientated FNLA. The entire squadron was eventually to flee south and became the main body of the newly established 32 Battalion then commanded by Colonel Jan Breytenbach. (Photo: Author)

Within days in mid-February 1993, Larny Keller's house in Centurion, a large conurbation south of Pretoria, became Executive Outcomes' new "center of operations."

As Harry Carlse, one of the former Reconnaissance Regiment (Recce) operators who was eventually to become a section leader at Soyo, tells it, "Eeben called me on the Wednesday and asked me to bring along some of my friends. I took four guys and a fifth joined us later." Five "platoon commanders" were contracted to handle recruitment, training and planning. All of them accepted the job. The men were Buks Buys, a former Reconnaissance Regiment major; Harry Ferreira, one of Barlow's old oppos

from 32 Battalion; Phil Smith, a former Rhodesian who had also served with Barlow in 32; Lafras Luitingh, another Recce major; and finally, one more individual from Barlow's sapper past, Mauritz le Roux.

The first four were each tasked with recruiting thirty of their more experienced military buddies from the past, while Le Roux had to bring in a dozen SADF engineers.

At this point, the team was warned that what lay ahead would not be easy. There would be a good bit of fighting ahead, they were told. In fact, Barlow suggested, there would be "a lot of action and that it would be heavy going."

Le Roux was further tasked to find a good supply of explosives, preferably C4, since all that was being offered by Luanda was some out-of-date TNT. He was cautioned that there would be "some blowing of bridges" and possibly mines to be laid. Training too would fall within Le Roux's brief.

Altogether, about 80 men were interviewed for the job. "It worried some of them that nobody was saying much to start with about where it was or what we had to do. We'd only be given the specifics once we arrived at our destination. What they did make clear from the start was that it would be no walkover," was Harry Carlse's view.

There were initially no ranks within EO, with the men being broadly graded according to positions held while still in the SADF. Barlow appointed team leaders, and to start with, the men were allowed to choose their own section leaders. All were warned that there would be no death benefits for members' families. Nor, he stated, was there to be any medical insurance[5].

The main base designated as a gathering point for the mercenary group was Cabo Ledo, an Angolan Army training base a few hours' drive south of Luanda. As one of the men commented, "there were sections coming up to Cabo Ledo whereas we'd been expecting platoons." Still, by the end of the week, just about the entire crew had gathered there and the men were told that Eeben and the others had received good assurances from Luanda that the FAA troops accompanying them into Soyo were "totally up to scratch," and that the opposition they were likely to encounter at Soyo consisted solely of nine UNITA policemen armed with .38 Special revolvers.

Tactical planning for the operation was in the hands of Lafras Luitingh (who years later worked with Blackwater founder Erik Prince in Somalia, and Rhodesian war veteran Phil Smith and one of the section leaders.

While it wasn't Lafras Luitingh's job to liaise with Colonel Pepe de

Castro, the Angolan commander who would be in overall control – the same man, incidentally, who was to lead EO's attack on the diamond fields at Cafunfo a while later – he appeared to slip into that capacity as things progressed. All agreed that it was a convenient arrangement, especially since Luitingh had many years of Special Forces combat experience.

Weapons provided by the government included AKs, RPKs, PKMs, RPDs as well as Dragunov sniping rifles. Training included sessions with former Soviet 60 mm and 82 mm mortars, as well as an update on section attacks, contact and grenade drills.

On March 3, with all preliminary work completed at the old Cuban base, the entire group, together with all their equipment, was flown north to the Angolan enclave on Cabinda, all of which lies on the north shore of the Congo River. En route they passed over Soyo and the men crowded around the Antonov-24's portholes to catch a glimpse of their ultimate destination. They were not disappointed. The plan was to spend the night at the Cabinda base and attack the following day.

Two large self-propelled barges operated by the Angolan Navy were to leave Cabo Ledo for the north at the same time, each with 500 Angolan soldiers aboard, together with the bulk of the heavy stuff, their ammunition and other hardware. There were also four T54/55 tanks, two to a vessel. But on pulling out of Cabo Ledo, one of the barges had mechanical problems, which meant that everybody on board the crippled vessel had to climb over onto the second barge and bring everything with them. The tanks, of course, stayed.

But that did mean that the expected time of arrival of the single barge was delayed. With its increased load, it could only manage a few knots and would arrive off Soyo a day late.

Taking Soyo with such a small force was an inordinately tough call. Certainly, had EO been aware of what was waiting for them on the ground, the job would never even have rated consideration. As we now know, they faced a long, hard battle to win back the town as well as the adjacent Kwando port. They were eventually required to also clear much of the surrounding area that had been infiltrated by guerrillas. But first they had to take the main military base, and that lay south of two large oil storage tanks at Quefiquena. What made it doubly difficult was that the entire complex was surrounded by some of the most magnificent primeval forest in Africa, which though "triple

canopy spectacular," sometimes made combat extremely hazardous.

Under normal circumstances, trying to displace several hundred well-entrenched enemy forces from positions that had been reinforced for more than a month should have required something like a force of brigade strength. Armor and close air support would also have backed the effort. Indeed, Luanda promised it all, but in the end, very little materialized. An Angolan Air Force Hind did make the occasional cursory pass, mostly at heights in excess of 5,000 feet, but that was useless.

In his initial discussions with the Angolans Barlow had made several stipulations which he felt were critical to the success of the venture. The first was that the Luanda government pay for the operation in advance. Another was that while it lasted, EO would not be interfered with, either by the Angolan Army or the country's politicians. The same held for government commissars and political functionaries, a feature of the country's Marxist establishment. There was no argument from Luanda on any the points raised by the South African.

Consequently, instead of attacking Soyo on March 4, a three-man reconnaissance team was sent in to infiltrate the area. Until then, the EO squad had to rely solely on intelligence provided by the Angolan Army, which, they soon realized, was sketchy. Most of it was obscure and invariably based on second-and even third-hand sources. Usually they got it all wrong.

"FAA couldn't even give us the coordinates of the town," one of the men recalled. The men were thankful for the delay because apart from being able to recce the target area from up close, the supply barge with its support force and ammunition had still not pitched. The supplies on board were to become a critical asset during of early stages of fighting. In fact, without them, the South Africans would almost certainly have been overrun.

By now there had been several joint planning meetings involving the EO command and the FAA. It was agreed that the two tanks would provide immediate backup, together with the 1,000 Angolan troops, their ammunition and food. Since the South Africans would go in first – with the FAA element being landed from the sea – all 40 of the initial force would come in by air from the north, carried in three Mi-17 helicopters.

One issue raised at that final meeting by some of the men was concern about the non-arrival of the on-site medical support team that the recruiters had said would be in place before they set out. The company had promised to set up a field hospital alongside the runway with Dr Francis Smit, the first

MD to be badged as a Special Force operator in the SADF, in attendance. But, as they were soon to discover, he was only to arrive weeks later and then after much prompting by the men as casualties started coming in. Those fighting across the water were kept in ignorance of this fact, which was to have serious consequences later.

Undeterred, the force finally set out early on the morning of March 5, flying the entire leg across the Congo River barely three feet above the water. The team leaders would have liked to have the men on the ground before dawn, but none of the Angolans could fly at night. So first light it was.

Composed of three sections, which included two 12-man stopper groups deployed to east and west, the 14-strong Assault Group – which included Harry Ferreira, Luitingh, Phil Smith and Le Roux – went straight in with the Angolan chopper pilot putting his load down on the beach about a mile short of the oil storage tanks. The original plan was for him to land directly behind the tanks, but having reached the opposite shore and aware of a potential for trouble, a rather wild-eyed, trembling Angolan pilot would go no further.

This immediately presented the attackers with a raft of problems, not least being that their packs were extremely heavy with extra ammunition, food and water. They'd never expected to have to hike anything like that distance through dense undergrowth, compounded by a swamp and puddles of mud sometimes feet deep.

The answer was for them to drop some of their heavier stuff, which was not the best idea. However, as Lafras Luitingh admitted afterwards, there was no alternative. The first items ditched were their 60 mm Patmor mortars and shells. The attackers were not to know it yet but it was a bad mistake: waiting for them at Quefiquena was a UNITA force at least 300 strong.

EO's initial target, explained Harry Carlse, was UNITA's living quarters at the Quefiquena base. "But being dropped so far away, it was a while before we could make contact with the original Recce team: it was their job to lead us in," he explained. "We'd also agreed beforehand that the stopper group, Team One, would provide early warning to the west of the LZ. Team Three took up a position to the east. Our group was responsible for the first assault."

Instead of attracting fire immediately, the first of the EO teams moving forward took the UNITA guerrillas by surprise. They found a bunch of rebels congregating at the main gate of the target compound, obviously intrigued by unusual helicopter activity in their area, "but when we sneaked up alongside

one of the big storage tanks, they never even saw us. We opened fire and within 20 minutes we'd overrun their positions and forced them to vacate the compound and make a dash for it into the jungle.

"They left in such a hurry that their radios were still playing. There was money, clothes and weapons strewn about. Surprise was absolute and obviously, that pleased us."

What also surprised the South Africans was that the defenders had secured their AKs to the steel fence surrounding the complex with wire. "So when we hit them, they left it all behind. It was obviously a measure to prevent troops from grabbing their guns and bolting." Still, fire from the base remained intense and after a short consultation with the others, Mauritz le Roux decided to head back to the LZ and fetch the mortars. When he returned, the additional weapons came in handy for finally routing the remainder of Quefiquena's defenders.

At this point, one of the stopper groups a few hundred yards down the road towards the west ambushed a green Renault, killing its driver. Inside they found the vehicle stuffed with piles of Angolan banknotes, three feet high and worth millions in the Angolan national currency. Executive Outcomes had hijacked the enemy battalion's pay for the month !

After that, things didn't go so well. With surprise lost, UNITA opened fire on one of the other teams from about 300 yards, but after fierce retaliation, that group was driven back. But it didn't last. UNITA quickly regrouped and launched a counterattack that halted any kind of forward momentum.

Said Carlse: "Worse, the barge with all our reinforcements and armor hadn't arrived as it should have. It was six hours late and we had to fight hard to retain what we'd taken. When it eventually got there, the naval units came under concerted fire when UNITA forces – sitting on a patch of high ground that overlooked the region – laid down a hail of fire that included recoilless rifles, RPGs, mortars, light and heavy machineguns." By now the South Africans were running short of ammunition.



“Colonel Callan” (back to the camera) was one of the mercenaries recruited to fight in Angola during the early days of the civil war. His real name was Costas Georgiou, of Cyprus extraction and served in the British Army but never made more than corporal. He ended up shooting many of his own men and was later captured and executed by the Luanda Government. (Photo: Author’s collection)

Finally, at about noon, the 300-strong contingent of government troops arrived and none too soon. The 82 mm mortars they ferried ashore provided immediate relief. With the South Africans taking charge, these black soldiers were spread around the outer defenses, though it was immediately clear, with some of them wandering aimlessly and dangerously about, almost like schoolboys on a stroll, that they had absolutely no idea of what danger they faced.

More problems followed. Because of the sustained fire the barge captain,

in bringing his vessel onto the beach, forgot to drop his retaining anchor. That meant that while the troops were able to clamber ashore, the vessel ended up broadside to the beach. Worse, it couldn't land its tanks.

One of these T-54s, a noisy, smoke-belching beast, was eventually taken off on the fourth day, but because it attracted so much attention – coupled to a hopelessly incompetent crew – the single piece of armor made only marginal difference to the outcome of the Battle for Soyo, though it did eventually help EO to take the adjacent town. The other tank ended up buried in soft sea sand up to its turret and is still there.

The additional FAA (Angolan Army) support, for all its shortcomings, did result in UNITA halting its retaliation for a couple of hours. A second attack followed when several hundred UNITA troops came forward in platoon-strength groups. According to Carlse this was an extremely determined effort, backed by mortars and rockets from further back. The defenders could immediately detect a new and single-minded discipline among the attackers coming at them: clearly, these fighters were Savimbi's Special Force *Groupos de Bate* and they knew what was required of them.

Mauritz le Roux: "They headed right at us, with the issue being made more difficult by a ring of ten-or-12-feet deep oil retaining canals that had originally been built as a precautionary measure to prevent spills from the oil storage tanks. They completely surrounded the complex.

"When the rebels popped into these culverts, we couldn't see them, nor they us, because they were at a much lower level than our positions. But they were actually only 15 or 20 yards below our lines and we could hear them talking among themselves." That didn't stop the infiltrators from hurling scores of grenades from down there and as Le Roux recalls, it was then that some of the men started to get hurt.

"We retaliated, of course, but our numbers were small compared to theirs," said Carlse, adding that the battle lasted about 90 minutes before UNITA pulled back again. Then the unit's only medic, "Bossie" Bosman, was hurt when, in a bid to escape sustained mortar fire, he hurled himself headlong into one of the culverts. It wasn't an intentional option: rather, he thought he would land on grass, so dense was the undergrowth. Bosman was fortunate to clamber out before the enemy grabbed him.

At about this point, said Le Roux, some of the men realized that we had been short-changed by Buckingham. "We were clearly deep in the shit. There were very few of us and huge numbers of the enemy. Our Angolan allies

were all but useless. All we had between us were small hand-held radios. Where were the nine policemen with revolvers that we'd been told about at Cabo Ledo, the guys asked.

"The most serious shortcoming of all was that there was no way that we could tell those people waiting at our support base in Cabinda what conditions on the ground around us were like. The radios with which the groups had been issued were short range and contact with headquarters across the water was impossible.

"Consequently, there could be no backup at short notice and obviously, no casualty evacuation should the worst happen. Also, we'd been told that there would be 'an open-heart surgery' clinic made available on one of the oil rigs, but we never saw anything like it. There wasn't even a doctor waiting on the other side for those wounded who were ferried out the next day."

Le Roux is outspoken about the way he and the other South Africans were "exploited" by their British bosses with almost no regard for safety. As he commented bitterly: "They would never have done that if the boys had been British… they simply wouldn't have been allowed to do so."

Some really serious business started not long afterwards, with the guerrillas probing attackers' defenses towards the south and east of Quefiquena. That affected some of the EO groups who had followed the initial group in, with them taking hits and having to make do with a precarious defense.

The section leaders felt that the biggest problem facing them at that point was the foliage that surrounded much of the complex. As Le Roux recalls, the entire area was fringed by heavy jungle, so any kind of clear field of fire was out of the question. In places the jungle actually overhung their positions, so that some of the men could barely see 15 yards into the undergrowth. UNITA ruthlessly exploited this advantage.

As he recalls, the Soyo campaign was a close-quarter operation throughout. Said one of the men: "The rebels would infiltrate right up to our positions at night to attack. Or they would toss some grenades at us. Then they would call and taunt us, telling our blokes that they were going to die."

Another recalled that there were times when rebel fighters showed no fear: "Their perseverance amazed us all. Also, their combat tactics were excellent," he declared.

Then Jeff Landsberg was wounded in the foot and his mates had to haul

him to cover. With a small squad under Harry Carlse, this team had been trying to get at one of the enemy's artillery pieces – a D30 – but eventually that effort was abandoned. They were not only visible to the enemy but also badly isolated from the main force. As Carlse reckons today, it would have been crazy to go on.

He takes up the story: "With darkness that first night approaching fast, all three sections regrouped in an attempt to establish some sort of procedure. We knew that there would be a night attack because it was the way that UNITA operated. But at about this point, some of the EO guys said that they were worried about being sucked into something that none of them could handle. Obviously they were worried about casualties and they had a point. We'd been at it from the time we'd arrived.

"Others declared that it hadn't been made clear to them when they took the job that there would be so much fighting. A few argued that rather, they'd envisioned training. These were a bunch of seriously rattled men.

"As section leaders, we believed that our best option lay in setting up a defensive line alongside the compound that we'd captured earlier. By nine that night – almost within touching distance of the jungle – everybody had dug themselves a foxhole, most of which were spaced perhaps five or ten yards apart. Elsewhere there were large open areas that needed to be dominated and for which we knew a large body of government troops had been deployed and were waiting for orders to attack."

At midnight UNITA arrived and the guerrilla movement launched its biggest attack that lasted more than two hours. With all forces on call, the EO leaders were confident that they could hold their positions. However, when their Angolan Army allies didn't react when ordered to open fire, it took the South Africans about a minute to realize that they were on their own: all the government troops had disappeared into the night.

As some of the men reflected afterwards, they should have expected it since so few FAA soldiers had been issued with more than a single magazine for their AKs. As for their illustrious officers, almost all of them hot-footed it towards the rear after the first shot.

During this attack the South Africans took their third casualty with Harry Ferreira wounded in the arm. A short while later Theuns Kruger took shrapnel in his head from a grenade, though neither wound was serious. But it was certainly indicative of how close the two forces were to each other because the grenade that wounded Kruger had been hurled from only yards

away. By now, all three section leaders were aware that if they didn't react more forcefully, UNITA had enough manpower and seemingly unlimited supplies of hardware to eventually breach their lines.

One of the more revealing comments about this attack was that incoming fire was so fierce that those of the men who didn't have their kit bags in their foxholes with them, had them shot to ribbons where they'd placed them, just above their heads.

With daylight, work was immediately started to reorganize the government defenses. Barely an eighth of the original FAA force was still around at sunrise, though they were joined by another group who slunk in guiltily when additional ammunition and water was handed out. It had originally been arranged before leaving Cabinda that a helicopter supply drop would be sent on the second day and this was the most welcome sight of the operation so far. They also used this opportunity to ship out the wounded.

By now UNITA had also started lobbing heavy mortars at the defenders… none too efficiently because most landed wide. For the rest of the time, they fired artillery salvos of four or five shells. After dark, the previous night's drama was repeated, only this time the defending FAA troops were a little more responsive. There wasn't a man among them who wasn't aware that if the South African position were overrun, they'd be the next to be slaughtered.

Mutterings among some of the EO men was now becoming audible. More than half the mercenary force wanted out. This wasn't what they had been hired for, they insisted. Also, they argued, they weren't all infantry-trained and things could only get worse. As one of the more experienced fighters concluded, "they resented having to work hard for that nice big paycheck which, with all the percentage incentives now being offered, had become very fat indeed."

At the same time, things were going badly for the government's troops. While the South Africans helped where they could, their Angolan counterparts were simply not able to withstand protracted fire. Some FAA soldiers became disorientated. Others broke ranks and fled. Language, too, was a problem, even though four EO members could speak good enough Portuguese to make their presence felt.

That night brought more of the same. Though the EO officers had extended their lines forward about 300 yards, largely to avoid UNITA getting into the retaining canal around the base, and placed a large FAA squad in position, when an attack came at about midnight the South Africans were

again on their own. Once more all the Angolans had fled.

Two hard-fought days in the first encounter involving Executive Outcomes mercenaries might well have been the last, the way things were running. It was time to turn the battle around, and here South Africans, fighting beside their former enemies, came into their own. But it was going to get worse before it got better…

For Sunday 7 March, Executive Outcomes had planned – together with the Angolan Army (FAA) commander – to launch an early-morning raid against Dr Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels. Surprise: none of the Angolan troops appeared for this third day of operations. Instead, those who were left – about 100 of the original 1,000 – wandered into camp shortly before noon. As Mauritz le Roux says, it was a monumental disaster.

Having spread the recalcitrants out in an extended line along the front and urged them to dig themselves in, nobody could do more than wait for the next UNITA attack. That didn't take long in coming.

To Harry Carlse, it was obvious that their lines could not hold indefinitely. The Angolan soldiers lacked both the tenacity and incentive to face seasoned guerrillas. So, grabbing seven of his mates and calling the lone T54/55 tank forward, they moved in among FAA ranks, with a man stationing himself every 10 yards or so to fight alongside them. They quickly got these shaky troops into something of a routine, encouraging them to coordinate magazine changes and to try to make something of an effective stand. They were effectively trying to inculcate basic military training into raw recruits under fire.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One of the black mercenaries recruited by Executive Outcomes from former SADF troops after the Battle of Soyo. The majority of these men were crack and well-motivated troops who were to see a lot of action as mercenaries in Sierra Leone. (Photo: Author)

As he recalls today, the presence of this small group of South Africans right there among them worked wonders. “Suddenly, with us shouting orders, showing them how and retaliating accurately, started to have an effect. We gave them the courage to do the same. And in the end, that’s exactly what happened. When they looked again UNITA was on the run and our lines were able to move out even further.” The tank, meanwhile, was blasting merrily away at anything that moved and became a powerful rallying point in the battle that followed.

With that, more of the EO men started to move up while others began to prepare food. Earlier Le Roux had cut some 44-gallon drums in half, cleaned them out and used them to boil water for cooking rice.

“We distributed great globs of rice while handing out ammunition. We also passed around extra magazines that were desperately needed by some of the African soldiers. Many of them still had only the one with which they had been issued and considering the circumstances, that was ridiculous,” Le Roux commented.

What was also a little absurd, he added, “was that once the rice was on the boil, more and more of these FAA troops would emerge from the jungle.” At one stage there were so many stragglers arriving that Le Roux thought a bus might have stopped close by and disgorged them all.

“We told them they could eat only if they stayed and fought and with that, we probably doubled our numbers.”

That evening, the third, Carlse remembers, presaged the first quiet night of the campaign.

With the helicopter bring in the casualties from across the water, shock immediately set in among those waiting in Cabinda. Tony Buckingham was appalled, especially since some of the wounds were infected. And there was still no doctor !

It stayed that way until some of the men were flown south to Windhoek four days later, by which time Jeff Landsberg’s suppurating foot – he had been wounded on the first day of action – had started to rot in a climate that is a constant 99 percent humidity almost the whole year round. The story given

to the Namibian hospital to which he and some of the others were admitted was that he formed part of a group of South Africans lifting landmines in Angola. Looking back, Landsberg was lucky to have avoided gangrene.

What soon became apparent to those watching this debacle – growing more intense each day – was that the so-called control group in Cabinda had almost no conception of what was going on across the Congo's estuary. In fact, with no comms in place, apart from messages passed back and forth by the helicopter pilots, they had no way of knowing. This was another of Simon Mann's blunders since it was this man who originally vetoed buying more elaborate communication equipment that could have kept everybody in the picture.

For their part, Larny Keller and Buks Buys were distraught at what the wounded were telling them. For a start, the numbers the tiny force was up against stunned them. Luanda had told them it would be a walkover. That underscored just how little the average South African knew about Savimbi's Special Forces. Even Buckingham was perplexed enough to use his satellite phone to call his SAS contacts to again ask for volunteers for a parachute drop. He offered good rewards for any takers. There were none.

Despite the brief measure of relief that the Mi-17 brought each time it flew across, conditions within EO's ranks continued to deteriorate. By now about the half the team wanted out, especially since they had been almost continually under attack ever since they got there.

On the morning of the third day consequently, rather than have a mutiny on their hands, the section leaders – who had been forced to accept a more aggressive, independent role – made the decision: those who wanted out should go and there should be no delay. They agreed that the dissenters had become more of an encumbrance than help. Also, they sensed that a negative approach within the ranks was affecting the ability of the others to perform. In any event, contributing little, they were also using up valuable food, ammunition and water.

Lafras Luitingh asked his Angolan counterpart to request an airlift out for those who wanted to leave and the quitters were back in Cabo Ledo by nightfall. This immediately prompted Buckingham to offer an extra $3,000 bonus if the EO force could hold Soyo for 30 days. At the same time, EO was now reduced to fewer than 20 men on the ground and still facing a most determined enemy.

But the mercenary group still had a few advantages, one of which was in

the air. EO had one asset that offered superlative support throughout the operation. That was “Ghost Rider,” the same twin-engined Cessna that originally ferried the men to Cabo Ledo and was now based in Cabinda. Its job was to scout opposing forces’ positions and, where possible, provide ranging and other observations for the mortar teams.

The biggest battle of the campaign kicked off at first light on the morning of the fourth day.

Throughout the night, Mauritz le Roux and other EO men on watch thought they heard an unusual amount of rustling in the grass around their position, but being exhausted from days of fighting, they put it down to the wind. Only once the battle had been joined did they realize that UNITA had spent hours positioning its force for the coming onslaught.

It was extremely well organized, Le Roux told me years afterwards. “They moved quietly and competently into place. Not one of them allowed his position to be betrayed by the noise of metal upon metal. Nor did we hear a whisper among any of them… these guys had been solidly trained… they knew their stuff.”

The EO officers were confident that whatever happened, they would be able to hold the 400 yards or so of front line along which their forces were dispersed. They’d also distributed a huge amount of ammunition the previous evening for just such an eventuality. There’d be no shortages when the attack came, they reckoned. Nor was there.

One of the mercenaries, JJ de Beer, had just been wakened for his watch when he stood up on the edge of his foxhole. In a passive, sleepy gesture he stretched his arms out above his head. With that, just about every enemy PKM, RPD, RPG rocket, RPK and mortar within a half-mile range opened up. Without even thinking about it, he buckled his legs and plopped full-length into the foxhole. He remembers it being the first time at Soyo that they had come up against rifle grenades.

Though the war raged on the verge of a series of cassava fields for about three hours, it seemed to slacken a little every 30 minutes or so, which allowed both sides to take stock. UNITA used the break to haul back their wounded and dead, something at which they were adept.

One of the men, Oosthuizen, had the sights of his RPG blow back into his face. The heavy steel rim on the weapon cut him severely. In fact, when you

meet the man today, you can still see the extent of the wound. Seeing the man blinded and in pain, Roelf van Heerden, one of the section leaders briefly got out of his foxhole to help him reorientate himself: when he returned to his tiny piece of turf, he found that a rifle grenade had exploded where he had been lying minutes before.

There were many close encounters in the battle that served to remove just about every leaf in the trees and bushes above and around the defenders' trench lines. Louis Engelbrecht, a Koevoet veteran from the old South West Africa, was using his PKM when he suddenly found it would no longer fire on full auto. He'd cock his weapon and fire a single shot. Then he'd have to cock it again. That went on a while until he discovered that an AK bullet had neatly lodged in the PKM's gas chamber. It had entered just below the supplementary barrel that operates the PKM's blowback system. An inch up, down or sideways, and he would have taken the bullet in his head. Lucky man !

At this point Carlse remembers some of the men starting to act peculiarly. There were distinct signs of shell shock among a few of them.

Their eyes would quiver from side to side and a few would act and talk irrationally, but not enough to get themselves killed. The ongoing attrition was affecting the guys, as it had some of the FAA troops. A few tried to bolt into the jungle before being cut down by automatic fire. Altogether 14 Angolan troops were killed in the attack, with more than 100 wounded, several dozen of them seriously.

For several more hours the battle went on. Then, gradually, to the surprise of all, it slackened. According to Mauritz le Roux, something totally unexpected then took place. The defenders were astonished to see the UNITA commanders pull their men back and it didn't take long for the entire area to be clear. The guerrilla force too, it seems, had had enough, though word later came through that their senior commander was killed by a mortar bomb that exploded right next to him.

It took a while longer for the dust to settle. Though elated to have survived that turmoil, the mercenary officers checked defenses and pulled back those in need of attention. Others were relieved when distress became obvious. But it all took time. Meantime, more ammunition was handed out and preparations were started to cook the morning meal.

1 Extracted from *War Dog: Fighting Other Peoples Wars* by Al Venter, Casemate Publishers,

Philadelphia US and Newbury, England: Chapter 16

2 *Uniao Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola* (National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola)

3 *Forcas Armadas de Angola*

4 *Private Armies and Military Intervention* by David Shearer: Adelphi Paper #316: International Institute for Strategic Studies/OUP, London, 1998

5 There is a considerable difference of opinion whether or not the earlier EO recruits were warned that there would be no death benefits for the members" families, or that there would be medical insurance, something that became standard with all EO personnel later. In fact, after Phil Smith was killed at Soyo, it took a long time and "a little unconventional pressure" on the part of some of his buddies to get a settlement made to his wife Fiona. Smith – like Eeben Barlow – was a former 32 Battalion operator. The two had not only seen action together, but were also good friends and knew each others' families well. This blatant lack of family support by an organization making millions was regarded by many of those involved at Soyo as reprehensible.

CHAPTER NINE

HOW THE PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANY CONCEPT EVOLVED

The private military or security company – or more simply, mercenary – is essentially a burgeoning legacy of employing "hired guns" to fight foreign wars. Indeed, things are going so well with the "merc" community in the New Millennium that the trend is as much a contemporary phenomenon as the iPod. Tens of thousands of these people are active in just about every trouble spot on the globe. At one stage there were almost 30,000 of them in Iraq, making the gathering of PMCs there the second largest force in the country after the US military.

Mercenaries, as we all know, have been around forever, but South Africans set the ball rolling in the modern era. In two African civil wars, it took veteran South African soldiers – many of them having served in Special Forces units and with years of experience fighting in Angola and adjoining territories – to halt the carnage.

The first civil war was in Angola, where the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, or MPLA, had been fighting a bunch of guerrillas led by a Swiss-educated, Mao-espousing revolutionary who called himself Dr Jonas Savimbi. Things had gone so badly for the Marxist Luanda government that Savimbi eventually controlled four-fifths of the country, but not a single city or town.

Still, the damage that UNITA caused was enormous. Savimbi had not only managed to fight for and hold onto some of Angola's wealthiest diamond producing areas, but he'd begun to turn his attention towards some of the most extensive oil producing areas on the African Continent. Angola, it

should be observed, is a significant supplier of crude oil to the United States.

After suffering a series of defeats at the hands of the rebels and losing a major oil pumping facility at Soyo – that historic battle features later in this volume – somebody in London thought that it might be a good idea to bring in a mercenary force to counter UNITA's growing presence. That man was Tony Buckingham, a former British SAS operative, who was not only well connected in the international oil trade but also a good friend of Angola's President Dos Santos.



While serving with Executive Outcomes in Angola, South African – all veterans of their own Border Wars – played a seminal role in training elements of the Angolan Army, like these at the Rio Lomba Special Forces training camp. These troops were later severely tested in battle against UNITA guerrillas. (Photo: Author)

Buckingham, having contacted his South African friends – who said they could have a force willing and ready to move within about a month – flew to Luanda to put his case personally to the Angolan Government. It wasn't an easy task he'd set himself, in large part because it had never been done

before.

The South African Army and Air Force had been at war with Angola and its Cuban and Soviet allies for more than two decades. Yet their members were the very people that Buckingham wished to hire as mercenaries to counter UNITA's expanding military presence in this West African state. Hiring them would have been almost equivalent to the Palestinians taking on Israeli Special Forces veterans to serve their needs.

To most of the Angolan military brass, the very idea of having what had been a hated enemy serving within their ranks was anathema. Indeed, said some of Angolan generals, many of whom had crossed swords with South Africans in the past, the concept reeked of duplicity.

One of the arguments tabled by such Angolan generals was quite simple: How did anyone know whether the South African mercenaries were not in fact working for Savimbi ? And, of course, their argument made good sense, because after all, mercenaries fight for money and, more often than not, answer the call of the highest bidder.



Former South African Reconnaissance Regiment Major Wynand du Toit overlooks training routines at the Rio Lomba base. He was hired by EO, but because he served years in solitary after being captured by the Angolan Army in a Cabinda raid, he was never allowed to see action with this mercenary group. (Photo: Author)

In the end things didn't quite work out that way. A South African mercenary force that called itself Executive Outcomes was recruited to handle the Angolan military stalemate, went in and spent more than a year knocking the pants of Jonas Savimbi's UNITA. They took quite a few losses of their own, both on the ground and in the air and – even to the critics – that was adequate proof of commitment.

With that war ended, Sierra Leone – then also fighting a savage bunch of rebels who liked to cut the hands and feet off children and old women and called themselves the United Revolutionary Front – asked Executive Outcomes to help out. That the South Africans did, with some of their story detailed elsewhere in this book.

It says much that wherever they fought, the South African mercenary force was comparatively small, never more than 500 fighting men in Angola and about a quarter that number active at any one time in Sierra Leone. Compare that with the 16,000 United Nations troops from a dozen nations that had been deployed in Sierra Leone for several years (at about $1 million a day) and were distinctive only for the number of times they were surrounded by the rebels and persuaded to hand over all their weapons. That usually took place without a fight. Also, though this is unconfirmed, the South Africans are understood to have received less than $100 million for their efforts in both African states.

Fast forward to the second invasion of Iraq and, by all accounts, there were many people who had followed the successes of Executive Outcomes in Africa and thought that the same principle could be applied on the ground east of Suez. Meantime, South Africa had passed a law that forced the disbandment of this highly effective mercenary organization, Executive Outcomes. With all those veterans out of work, it was natural that they should look elsewhere.

It wasn’t long before dozens of private military companies were directly involved in the Iraqi struggle, soon recognized as the most important conflict of the era. At one stage, though nobody was keeping accurate records, it was estimated that about half the private military contractors helping to maintain some sort of stability in Iraq were South African.

Private military companies in Iraq either quickly thrived or were never heard of again, though the bigger American firms like DynCorp, Blackwater, MPRI, Air Scan, Vinnell, Titan, Kroll and others lobbied furiously among old friends and associates in Washington to achieve results. Others disappeared off the radar because the bigger multi-nationals bought them out: actually, all that really changed was the uniforms worn by the men under their employ.



A big day for Executive Outcomes in Angola was the passing out parade of FAA troops in the presence of senior Angolan Army officers. A display of rebel weapons can be seen on a table in the foreground. (Photo: Author)

The British weren't at all shy to show their hand in Iraq. Several companies, including Control Risks Group, Armour Group, Global Risk Strategies and quite a few others, quickly made their mark. Fairly early on, Aegis Defence Services was one of the first non-American firms chosen to make the US military presence less visible.

Former British Army officer Colonel Tim Spicer – he had seen active service in the Falklands War – was at the helm when Aegis Defence Services won a three-month contract worth almost $300 million to provide 75 teams of eight men each to provide security on all major Iraqi government projects following the handover of sovereignty. At that stage it was the fifth largest contract ever awarded by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

Several of the companies involved in this work had South African origins, including Erinys (SA), which in August 2003 landed a $100 million contract in Iraq to defend oil installations and pipelines. It was run by Sean Cleary, a former senior official in pre-independence Namibia and also a senior political adviser to UNITA's Jonas Savimbi. It was axiomatic that Cleary was also one

of the most vociferous critics of Executive Outcomes, since EO was in the van of the anti-UNITA military campaign.

There was even a company from the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean. Founded by Ray Fonseka, a former SAS instructor, Pilgrims Security Limited provided security for numerous Western news media firms.

The American military authorities in Iraq came to rely increasingly on civilian contractors to run and maintain a variety of military systems, in part because these PMCs often brought in specialists to undertake particular types of tasks and at other times, because of a shortage of manpower.

Security was a perpetual problem faced by the authorities in Baghdad and other Iraqi centers and while the PMCs were not a particularly welcome addition to the military equation in this embattled land, their role was both useful and effective.

But they also cost money – huge amounts of it, because these freebooters did not come cheap. The inspector general for the CPA reckoned in one of his reports that at least ten to 15 cents of every dollar spent on reconstruction in Iraq was for security.

Increasingly PMCs were doing the kind of work that had traditionally been reserved for military personnel. For instance, a year after the second invasion a California engineering company, AECOM Technology Corporation, was handed a $22 million contract by the Pentagon to help the military in Iraq plan projects, buy goods and services and administer reconstruction contracts.

In fact, reviewing the list of contracts awarded since then, up to the present day, billions of dollars have been spent in PMC-related ventures.

It wasn’t long before these firms started to require more personnel and they expanded their recruiting to other continents. They looked for what they wanted in Third World countries such as the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Colombia, Chile, Namibia, Nepal, Chile and Fiji. India presented immediate problems because entire units resigned to go to Iraq for the money.

Another downside was that some of these new recruits were neither as motivated nor as well-trained as professional soldiers who came from countries with established military traditions that stretched back almost a century. Such “established” countries included Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Israel and the Ukraine also got a look-in. It soon became

apparent that Third Worlders were being paid a lot less than the average American or British Special Forces soldier was getting from the private operators. But then again, it was mostly a question of value for money.

Michael Grunberg, one of the Brits who helped put Executive Outcomes on the map and was later a spokesman for Tim Spicer's Sandline International, gave this author some valuable help while he was putting together his book *War Dog*, the definitive work on mercenary activity.

His views on the kind of cash being paid by PMCs operating in Iraq were pertinent. I quote:

> "The market is bleeding out. Payments in Iraq exceed everything known so far. The best can get up to $1,200 a day. Small companies – like three people somewhere in an office in Washington, in need of some 250 trained former Special Forces and perhaps 4,000 local support – have no chance. There is only a small reservoir of well-trained former commandos worldwide. People formerly earning $400 to $500 a day tell us: 'Sorry Comrade, but in Iraq I will earn $1,000.' "

Other sources suggest that former professional soldiers with command and control skills (and that includes both former officers and NCOs with perhaps 15 or 20 years' experience in the field) were earning close to $100,000 a year. One friend who had served in the US Navy SEALs talked about earning $120,000 annually. Another mentioned $200,000… and he wasn't joking.

In these modern wars, where firepower always dominates and the enemy has plenty of it, fairly intensive short-term work suggests an increased element of risk. Most times that tends to offer much higher rewards. Security personnel working week-long contracts in sensitive parts of cities like Baghdad and in the always-contested Fallujah sometimes scored $1,000 a day, which was what certain Western helicopter pilots flying in Afghanistan were earning.

Before Blackwater had its problems, its employees were said to have been paid up to $2,000 a day for what were termed "Three Day Specials." In contrast, the Steele Foundation made no secret of the fact that it paid "specialists working in Iraq" anything from $10,000 to $20,000 a month.

Of course, there were risks aplenty in this kind of work in some of the

worst problem areas.

Early on in Iraq, the Washington-based International Peace Operations Association – since restructured and now calling itself the International Stability Operations Association or ISOA – reported an attack on a group of contractors. Hundreds of Iraqi militia converged on US government headquarters in Najaf and were repulsed, not by the US military, but most significantly, by eight Blackwater commandos. Before American reinforcements could arrive, Blackwater had sent in its own helicopters in the middle of an intense firefight to re-supply its men with ammunition and to ferry out a wounded marine.

"That same night, Hart Group, Control Risks and Triple Canopy were all involved in pitched battles."

In one of these firefights, in the city of Kut, a Ukrainian army unit retreated from the position it had been holding and left a number of CPA administrators stranded in the facility. For three days, personnel from Triple Canopy fought to secure those civilian individuals. Finally ammunition shortages forced a risky retreat by road to the Kut airfield. There Kellogg, Brown and Root evacuated everybody involved.

"But another group of PMC personnel, from Hart, who were protecting workers nearby, was surrounded. Abandoned by nearby Coalition forces, the firm's employees had to leave one of their comrades dead on a rooftop on which he and four colleagues had been fighting after their house had been captured."

Thereafter, an article in *Fortune* magazine observed that once larger private military concerns started competing for contracts the nature of both demand and economics within the industry changed:

> "They lured many of the firms' finest with what mercenaries respond to best: money. Standard wages for PSD (personal security detail) pros were previously running about $300 a day, according to people who know this market. Once Blackwater started recruiting for its first big job, guarding Paul Bremer, the rate shot up to $600 a day. Global Risk no longer had a lock on the market for Gurkhas, whose monthly wages rose from $800 to as high as $2,000…"

Another commentator said that the fact was that well-trained former UK and

US special operations forces received premium rates, probably at most $700 a day (less than $50 an hour), but the Chileans, Poles, Fijians and South Africans were getting considerably less. But they still gained the same proportional increase over what they would have earned within their own national armed forces. The attraction for PMC personnel is obvious, said Duncan Bullivant, who heads the small British firm Henderson Risk, which at the time, had around 40 employees operating in Iraq:

"Doing this kind of work for a year means some people have enough to retire on. Iraq is something of a goldmine at present. The profit margin is incredibly high, way in excess of the risk factor. I wouldn't give it more than another year at this level, the bubble will burst, but there's an immense drive to cash in while it lasts.

"However, the financial rewards can be overplayed, especially since the downsides for PMC contractors can be considerable, including:

- Most companies enforce regular periods of unpaid mandatory leave out of country on their employees every few months for rest and recharge;
- The dangers are considerable, and the work frequently demands a high level of experience and training;
- Although for some, the pay is tax-free, under US law, US citizens are still liable to US tax if they reside within the US for more than one month in the year; and
- Additional insurance and retirement contributions are the responsibility of individual contractors."

Thus, according to one insider, a typical contractor earning $500/day in Iraq might expect to work about 270 days in a year and gross $135,000. If they remain outside the United States for the mandated tax minimum of 330 days and thus qualify for the first $81,000 of income to be tax-free, they would still expect to pay some $16,000 in federal income taxes and $9,000 in self-employment taxes on the remainder. More typical are those who will not qualify for the tax break since in these extremely high-risk jobs it is important seeing the family as often as possible, in case the worst happens. They can expect to pay over $62,000 in total taxes, thus a net of about $74,000 in this example."

Clearly the money was excellent, but as more people from poorer countries were recruited and the war wound down, supply started to exceed

demand and salaries were driven lower.

Then with the “new” war in Afghanistan, many of the Iraqi PMC veterans moved their bases into Central Asia.

In another assessment, a DynCorp contractor, talking about his work in Iraq, was quoted in a news report about how the experienced private military contractor accepts his role. His view is instructive:

> “[The security operator] knows that some tactics can anger Iraqis. The convoys barrel through this city’s chaotic traffic creating their own right of way. In a traffic jam, security contractors may hop out of the vehicles and order Iraqis out of the way or hold up all traffic at a busy intersections and traffic circles to let their vehicles pass. They simply can’t afford to be a sitting target for someone with an assault rifle, bomb or rocket-propelled grenade.
>
> “Most of the times I’ve been with the security teams on the ground, they behave very professionally and without really antagonizing the locals. However, the driving is a whole different story. We cruise through the streets fast and furious and without much regard for the locals. That would piss me off, and I imagine it does the Iraqis too.”

When I visited one of the men who founded Blackwater, former Navy SEAL Gary Jackson, at his and Erik Prince’s 6,200 acre base at Moyock, North Carolina, he told me that that they had signed a $35.7 million contract with the Pentagon to train more than 10,000 soldiers in force protection.

I was shown over the site by Gary – who is actually British-born (his “Mum” was still living in Liverpool at the time) – and both the facilities and the men who were there for testing didn’t fail to impress. Since then, a number of scandals have enveloped the company and Erik Prince was ordered to answer for some of his actions (though the results remain inconclusive), while the company has changed its name.

Most recently, Erik Prince has joined forces with former Executive Outcomes founder Lafras Luitingh and moved into Puntland, Somalia, on a series of security contracts. That included buying the 40-year-old former South African Air Force Alouette helicopter gunship that the Puntland

Maritime Police Force uses for some of its patrols.

There is no question; mercenaries in Iraq came from all over. Their numbers included recently resigned British SAS and SBS professionals, American Special Forces personnel who had served with Delta Force, Green Berets, Rangers as well as specialist police officers with much-needed skills. All had to prove their potential beforehand, detailing everything they had done in uniform including length of service, military courses and the kinds of specialist training completed. If they had seen actual combat, so much the better, and if it all slotted together, these men were hired.

There were disadvantages of course; the first being that many crack Western units lost some of their best operators to the private sector. Also, the risks were sometimes high and many stories have surfaced over the years of contractors being involved in shoot-outs with the enemy or having been caught in ambushes and needing to fight their way out… battles that could sometimes last for hours.

Also, insurance was an issue from the start and in wartime that can be inordinately expensive because with PMCs it is not the government picking up the tab, but commercial companies.


IN MEMORY OF:
W. ROSS-SMITH † 11. 11. 1993
C. I. NDLOVU † 29. 03. 1994
L. C. J. COETZER † 02. 04. 1994
J. LAUBSCHER † 02. 04. 1994
R. D. MITZCHE † 02. 04. 1994
L. A. SWART † 20. 05. 1994
N. H. HAYES † 25. 07. 1994
P. H. DITTRICH † 07. 09. 1994
N. NDISHISI † 13. 10. 1994
J. A. KELLERMAN † 05. 11. 1994
EXECUTIVE
OUTCOMES

Granite memorial to those Executive Outcomes veterans killed in action during operations in Sierra Leone and Angola. All those who died were mercenaries, and little thought is given to the reality that these men gave their lives up for causes in which they believed. More salient, they saved countless lives in the process. (Photo: Author)

One of the most successful private military companies to have worked in Iraq, and afterwards in Afghanistan and elsewhere, was started and operated by Mauritz le Roux, an old friend from South Africa. An engineer by profession, he was a founder member of Executive Outcomes and went on to negotiate a contract with the Congolese government in the final days of the Mobuto Sese Seko regime.

In this he was assisted by two stalwarts of the game, “Gunship Ace” Neall Ellis (who proposed revitalising the Congo Air Force by quickly buying in some Soviet helicopter gunships, though none of Mobuto’s generals, many of them dollar billionaires, were willing to part with their precious money) and Roelf van Heerden, who had served with EO in Sierra Leone.

Le Roux, the ultimate opportunist, founded a company called SafeNet and started slowly with 40 members of his team in Iraq. Within three years that figure topped 4,000. Though his core support came from former friends within Executive Outcomes, he was not fearful about hiring Iraqi personnel, many of them former members of Saddam Hussein’s security forces.

Several other differences separated him from the majority of private military contractors operating in Iraq. One of these was that for his main base of operations, he chose not to be based in the much-favored Western enclave, the “Green Zone.” Rather, Le Roux picked a secluded area in a Baghdad suburb where he was able to block off some of the approaches and handle security issues in the way that he thought best.

Notably, security there was in the hands of Iraqi recruits, and not his operators who came from South Africa.

One of the consequences of this unusual effort was that SafeNet was never attacked on home ground, which meant that within three or four years he was one of the largest PMCs in the region.

Another was that – unlike many operators from American security companies who would prance about Rambo-like, cradling weapons and ammunition belts – SafeNet’s people took to wearing Arab garb. Their weapons were discreetly tucked away in the folds of their robes. It helped that its South African operators would wear Arab headdress if they believed

the occasion warranted it. Also, the vehicles they used were the usual everyday sedans seen in the streets of Iraqi cities and towns. No Hummers or fancy SUVs with their roofs open and arrays of hardware protruding.

It was Mauritz le Roux's view that if you went looking for trouble in Iraq, you usually found it. "So my people prefer to be unobtrusive, kind of under the radar in whatever they do…"

Essentially, because of the ever-present threat of ambush or attack in Iraq – and it seems to be getting that way in Afghanistan as well – Le Roux's operation has always been low-key, to the extent that when providing security and moving about in vehicles – even in highly sensitive areas – the men mixed easily with civilian traffic and hardly ever gave any clues as to their real purpose.

One of the first jobs entrusted to SafeNet was to get construction teams in and out of Fallujah, a six-day-a-week function that meant driving to and from a series of school and health construction projects through this extremely troubled area. Ambushes on the Fallujah road were a regular affair and Le Roux's security teams would discreetly ride shotgun fore and aft of the convoys, weapons in hand but out of view. There was rarely any trouble.

A few times as the construction teams passed through the heart of Fallujah – with buildings looming over the road on all sides – the jihadists would try their luck and ambush the convoys, invariably using the advantage of height from the second floor tiers of adjacent houses to gain tactical advantage.

Undeterred, a score or more of SafeNet's fighters would debus and return enough fire to put a quick end to any confrontation. As Le Roux told me afterwards, his people had no idea what kind of damage they caused, but both times they had only two of their escorting officers wounded.

He acknowledged that without adequate vigilance and preparation, it might have been much worse: while traveling, all the cars were in constant touch with each other by radio and anything suspicious passed around. As he suggested, "it doesn't take very long before you start to recognize the signs that there might be trouble ahead… locals avoiding eye contact, people moving off the street into sheltered positions or none of the usual friendly waves as we passed…"

Thereafter, those waiting to score points avoided any contact with SafeNet's columns. Indeed, the berths they gave these convoys, if not wide, were enough to suggest that they were not at all interested in making any

kind of connection.

The most convincing argument in favor of SafeNet's unconventional *modus operandi* – as opposed to the swashbuckling manner in which some American operators moved about – would be to compare the casualties suffered by another company. By the time Blackwater started to encounter the kinds of problems that caused inquiries back home and forced a name change, the American PMC had suffered about 30 fatalities.

In the same period, the South African company had had two of its operators killed, possibly three.

CHAPTER TEN

MERCENARY WINGS

Every war spawns anecdotes and those where mercenaries are involved, more than most, in large part because the majority of these "freelance" fighters are professionals, usually with solid Special Forces experience.

Some of the stories that have emerged in recent years are legend. Like Neall Ellis flying a lone Mi-24 against the rebels in Sierra Leone for four months solo with only a pair of side gunners for support. Or South African aviators in Angola during the civil war period using translated Russian instruction manuals to convert to flying MiG-23s and Sukhoi bombers.

One of the remarkable stories out of war-torn Angola involved a group of South African mercenaries airlifted into a remote region to harry rebel units. It all took place in heavy, triple-tiered jungle country near the Congolese border and, including air crews, there were about 44 men altogether, split evenly between two helicopters.

The job done, the choppers were called down to extract the men. Though the first bunch got away without incident, the jungle exploded the moment the wheels of the second Mi-17 touched ground. A huge enemy force had crept up to where the pick-up was about to take place. As one of those who came under attack recalls, "the chopper was picking up fire from just about everywhere."

Though the side gunners were supported by some of the men boarding who used their PKM machine guns, the Hip (NATO reporting name for the Mil Mi-17) took some serious hits.

Within a minute or so there were three men wounded, as well as a solid stream of fuel running down the *inside* of the helicopter's windscreen and into the cockpit. The machine had obviously been hit in one of the feed tanks,

probably by an RPG.

In the babble that followed – punctuated by the screams of the wounded – one of the engine oil pressure lights on the console flashed an emergency signal and the pilot had to make an immediate decision: fight or flee.

The first – recalls Charlie Tate, at the controls – was never an option "because it was obvious that we were outnumbered." But he had serious doubts about the second as he pulled on the collective and got airborne. And that only just happened because the helicopter was barely responding to its controls.



Neall Ellis, the world's most famous mercenary aviator - who General Sir David Richards, former British Chief of the Defence Staff called "a great man" in a private letter to the author - sits at the controls of his beloved and battered old Mi-24 helicopter gunship in Sierra Leone. "Nellis" as he is known to his pals, came close to being killed by a suicide bomber during a spell of duty in Somalia in December 2013. (Photo: Author)

By the time the first helicopter had joined him, Tate's machine was limping across the jungle spewing volumes of fuel. Meanwhile, all retaliatory fire from on board had ceased because the men feared that a spark might ignite the fuel vapors that, by then, had enveloped everyone. As it was, the crippled machine was trailing an enormous white cloud of vaporized fuel.

Barely two miles from where the ambush had taken place, Tate put his helicopter down. He had spotted an improvised LZ in a swamp… one with tree stumps sticking up everywhere.

"What we had to do in double-quick time was get everybody off, talk the other chopper down and just hope that with the additional load, he'd be able to get off the ground again," Tate recalled.

To his credit, the second pilot didn't even pause to think about it. He landed, loaded up and took off, the entire operation accomplished in mere minutes. It was significant that the Mi-17 involved ended up loaded with more than double the number of troops that the flight manual said was permissible.

In the end, everybody got away safely.

According to Neall Ellis – he flew chopper support missions in Afghanistan for three years and is currently flying operationally in Somalia – the Mi-17 Hip is the most rugged and versatile helicopter currently operational in any Third World theater of operations.

While the emergency Angolan airlift involved older Mi-8T models with antiquated TBV2-117 engines, Ellis flew more Mi-8 MTV helicopters fitted with TB3-117 VM engines for his more recent daily flights in Afghanistan.

"It is arguably the best rotor-wing aircraft in the world for its weight/ class for operations at altitude, often in unusually rugged conditions", he reckons, adding that there is simply no Western chopper in the same weight category can perform as well.

With full standard tanks carrying 690 gallons – and a fuel burn of around 185 gallons per hour at the altitudes at which these craft operate – a typical Afghan mission lasts for three hours. "Depending on outside air temperatures we haul four tons of freight inside the helicopter, 22 passengers with the cargo version or 28 passengers with the passenger version," he told me.

"We normally cruised at about 125 miles/hour and that allowed us to fly up to 370 miles in that mountainous region with a 20 minute reserve."

On any day of the year, he added, there are over 100 civilian helicopters operational in Afghanistan, every one of them ferrying supplies to some of the remotest outposts, staging posts, reconstruction units and military camps in Central Asia. The majority are Russian (and in some cases, former Soviet) Mi-8s.

More recently the United States brought in Sikorsky S-61s, Bell 214s and French-built Pumas as well as five-bladed, twin-engine medium-lift Sikorsky S-92s. One company operates Boeing Vertol BV107 twin-rotors, but that is the exception among private military companies in Afghanistan.

Additionally, there are a handful of Russian Mi-26 mega-helicopters in Kandahar. Depending on altitude, these can handle 90 passengers or 20 tons of freight. Also in this mix are a couple of Kamov KA-32 helicopters, deployed mainly to haul under-slung loads that might include ammunition, fuel or water. The KA-32 flies at around 180 km/hour with an endurance of roughly 150 minutes.



While the civil war in Angola continued, Saurimo – the diamond capital in the eastern corner of the country – became the center of air operations against the rebels. (Photo: Author)

All rotor craft operating in the region fly support missions of some form or another and being civilian operations they work daylight hours. The only after-dark flying in Central Asia is military and Department of State (DOS) Airwing helicopters whose pilots use night vision equipment.

Strung out at the three major operational air bases in Kabul, Bagram and Kandahar – the central hubs for supply distribution – almost a dozen aviation companies are involved. Apart from ammunition, food and water, most of the aviation and vehicle fuel needed for the war is flown in daily.

Among the larger players are companies like DynCorp as well as Supreme Aviation (which has been operating as an airlift services provider since early 2002 in support of multinational NATO Forces, the United Nations, as well as the United States military across three continents).

A Colombian company, Vertical de Aviación, is another major player in Afghanistan with the occasional BV107 twin-rotor. It operates in support of the US Army Corps of Engineers, US Army LOGCAP IV, as well as the Department of Defense's Counter Narco-Terrorism Program Office (CNTPO).

There is also the Department of State Airwing, which has Bell 205s, UH-1s, and leased Mi-8 helicopters. DoS is involved in the country's so-called drug eradication program, as well as providing regular flights for US Embassy personnel: their flights all carry armed personnel for protection should the chopper be forced down. While not officially referred to as a private military company or PMC (though the DoS Airwing comes close because it arms its helicopters) this is a US Government tasking operated by the American multinational DynCorp, based in Virginia.



Another South African mercenary veteran of Angola's war against UNITA rebels was "Juba" Joubert, sitting at the controls of an Mi-17 helicopter. On one of his flights during the attack on the diamond fields at Cafunfo, his chopper took a hit from a SAM-7, but he was still able to take his machine safely down. (Photo: Author's collection)

The remainder of the companies are strictly civilian and their pilots are not permitted to carry firearms.

What does come across forcibly is that the majority of helicopters in Afghanistan, and indeed in all Third World conflicts, are Hips, either Mi-17s or Mi8s.

Even ICI of Oregon, a civilian aviation and government services company that, despite its name, is based in Dallas, Texas, uses Hips in its overseas operations. The company was the prime contractor in the Sierra Leone war, doing work for the American Department of State, USAID, and OFDA, the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance. It was ICI that evacuated the American Embassy out of Liberia and then brought in reinforcements in 2002-2003. More recently the company has been active in Afghanistan and undertaking disaster relief in Pakistan.

Speaking off the record, a senior ICI executive told us that they preferred the Hip to Western helicopters for several reasons one being price and the ready availability of spares. Also, in maintaining their aircraft, the company follows the maintenance manual approved by the Russian Civil Aviation Authority one hundred percent.

As for using Russian pilots, he declared, "the US FAA would never allow an 'N'-registered civilian to fly in the zones we work. And American civilian pilots would be impossible to work with, once the shooting starts. I have had this experience, and don't wish to repeat it."



Carl Alberts – with back to the camera – overseas pre-flight preparations at Freetown's military headquarters from where the mercenaries attached to Executive Outcomes operated. (Photo: Arthur Walker)

He added that Moscow's CAA does not allow mixed crew to fly in "RA" helicopters, explaining that all Russian aircraft registrations are prefixed by "RA", in the same way that US-registered aircraft are prefixed by "N".

He also pointed to the fact that "Russian design philosophy is such that performing heavy maintenance in the field using in-house engineers is possible… we can repair radios down to the component level, replace engines and main gearboxes in the field."

It was Neall Ellis who observed that one of the reasons why the Hip was not that popular with Western aircrews was that while Western helicopters have set procedures to prepare for takeoff, with things invariably arranged in an ergonomically friendly order, it is very much otherwise with Russian choppers.

"The first two circuit breakers I activate are on either side of and behind my seat. The next, in sequence, is on my left, followed by another in the center, then to the right again, and so on.

"This was one of the reasons why I was keen, while flying support missions in West Africa, to get my hands on a surplus Aerospatiale Puma to

do some of the transport work in that heavily wooded jungle country." Also, Neall told me at the time, you could see the ground a lot better from the French chopper than the Russian.



The author spent time at one of Executive Outcomes' forward operational bases that overlooked the diamond trading center of Koidu in the east of the country. EO's Hips were regular callers, bringing men and supplies on a bi-weekly basis. (Photo: Author)

"This was especially helpful when flying into some of the more difficult LZs, where we'd approach through disproportionately tiny spaces flanked by some of the tallest trees in Africa." Of course, he has subsequently stated, all that changed once he started flying Mi-8s in Afghanistan and today he swears by them…

Offering his own two-bits worth, Peter "Monster" Wilkins, a former South African Air Force brigadier who flew chopper gunships in his own country's wars – and more recently has been active in the Sudan, Mali, Kosovo and Afghanistan – reckons that flying in various regions depends as much on the helicopter as individual preference.

"What I mean by preference is that you quickly get used to one type of helicopter… you get to know it intimately, its quirks, how and when to nurse it when the next fuel stop still lies two hours' flying away, or you have come under fire. Hence the more time you have in a specific type, the better you

like it and the more inclined you will be to opt for it in an emergency."

Wilkins has divided the available helicopters doing this kind of work in Third World/hostile regions into three basic categories, small, medium and large. Says Wilkins:

SMALL

You to need to ignore "toys" like Robinsons because, simply put, they are not able to do the job required. For me, the Aerospatiale Alouette III is a good choice, and for several reasons:

- Powerful for its size (awesome at very high altitudes which is proven by it still being utilized in the Alps by some First World countries.
- Better tail rotor than the modern Fenestron types (EC-120/130/135, etc.) which all use too much power in the very region where you need it… in the hover. NOTAR (no Tail Rotor) McDonnell Douglas aircraft are also not as good for the same reason because they are unable to work as hard as "regular tail rotor" types. After all, it was the Squirrel (AS 350) that landed on Mount Everest with a normal tail rotor: no Fenestron would have been able to do that.
- Analogue, old-fashioned instruments and electronics, which work best in primitive conditions where bush, dust and rain predominate. And if there are other problems, the Alouette can fly without most of them, versus the modern electronic marvels that often fail at the first hint of such conditions.
- Rugged build, able to work hard, absorb punishment (not from the enemy, few helicopters can absorb lead), but from passengers who kick and wave their steel weapons about inside, a condition that tends to rapidly ruin most modern helicopters.
- BUT – and it is a BIG but – the Alouette (like the Puma AS330) is old and too difficult to maintain today. So the younger Squirrel is an awesome workhorse anywhere, closely followed by the Bell 407. Both these machines do well in Africa at its worst. In my recent visit to Bamako in Mali in September 2013, we had a 407 operational in the desert interior and it worked like the proverbial packhorse. Other types *not* considered are the Bell 429, a light twin but too modern and unknown/unproven to date, Bell JetRangers and LongRangers and so on, many past their time and nowhere near as capable as the Squirrel, for example.
- The Eurocopter AS350 B2 Squirrel is my ultimate light recommendation

(but not the B3 as that has a glass cockpit, and is not likely to be as hassle-free in harsh African, Asian or Middle East environments

MEDIUM LIGHT

This includes the range of Bell 212/412, Sikorsky S-76, Dauphines, BK-117, etc. For me it is a toss-up between the tried-and-trusted Bell 212 and the BK-117.

- I regard the Bell 212 as better than the 412 for similar reasons to the Alouette (less finicky with analogue instruments, better power-to-weight ratio with slightly less powerful engines. These machines have proven ability and track record worldwide and are rugged to a fault.
- The BK-117 C1 is excellent for similar reasons and has good power reserves for hot and high. Its newer cousin the BK-117 C2, has the glass cockpit EC-145 version, is also capable and opted for by the US Army, but is stuck with the EC-135 glass cockpit, which may cause difficulties in African conditions. An advantage over the 212 is at least 20 knots in speed. Both are short-range machines, unfortunately.
- The S-76 is a good helicopter but was initially designed for executive use and for those needing to do rapid point-to-point transit in comparative luxury. This is no workhorse and would struggle to survive harsh conditions.
- I include the AW-139 in this category as it fares well against the Bell 412. The 139 is more modern, has a lot more power and reserves, etc., but again, it is possibly too modern to survive in a rugged environment like Central Africa or regions adjoining the Sahara. I say this because it has been favored over the 412s in the Persian Gulf due to power and good capacity, only to be sold off once more and replaced by Bell 412s. The 412 is ideal for the offshore oil industry as it has many features that the older 212 lacks.

LARGER HELICOPTERS

Some, perhaps not classed as “Heavy Lift” but included here as real heavy lift types are rare and expensive like the Chinook, Mil-26, Sikorsky Skycrane and so on. I’m speaking from experience because I currently fly the range. I am not familiar with the Hip range of helicopters because I have not flown them, but I do favor the Puma/Super Puma family.

- Newer versions like the Mil-171 are capable and rugged, still with analogue instruments and so on, but tend to come with a higher price tag. That factor allows the Puma family a look-in.
- The Puma might be old and rugged but is difficult and expensive to maintain. Eurocopter allowed themselves to get behind the curve visa-vis the Hip Mil and they will have difficulty producing something competitive. Their latest top-of-the-line is the EC175, which is an outstanding helicopter, but too expensive and technological to compete in places like Africa (except offshore). Their Super Pumas (AS332 family) and better EC225s (also Super Puma but better) have done very well but they were hurt by the influx of cheap Mil helicopters into the "Free World" following the fall of Soviet Russia. So they have had to take a leaf from the South Africans and "re-invented" the Oryx, which is now the 332 C1 Super Puma. This is great machine as it is categorized Super Puma but is slightly shorter and lighter but with same power, hence more capable. The latest is the 332 C1e ("e" for Electronic) version, which has the 225's glass cockpit. The Durban, South-Africa-based company Starlite Aviation is its first customer, taking the first two off the production line at the Eurocopter factory in Marignane, Marseilles, with options for two more. The 332 C1e is now a good deal cheaper than the 225, has a better lifting capability and should take its fair share of the market for work horses because it can lift 9,600 lbs. It is not optimized for offshore (so as not to compete with the 225), so it will be very useful onshore for those requiring a powerful and capable helicopter.
- In a nutshell, the Puma is too old, but its youngest sibling is about to make an impact. The handling characteristics of the greater Puma family also make it excellent to fly. It is also more agile than the Hip family.
- Finally I must make mention of a helicopter, also rather old but a star in its own right. This is the venerable Sikorsky S-61. Much as they were built for sea level and battle above 3,500 ft (like the French-built Super Frelon), there is a company in the United States (Carson Helicopters of Pennsylvania) that has modified several, giving them plastic blades together with glass cockpits. By all accounts these machines are doing surprisingly well in Afghanistan where it is certainly hot-and-high. I operated out of Forward Operating Base Shank in Eastern Afghanistan alongside these venerable S-61s and that's nearly at 7000 ft. The new capability gives them an extra *ton* of capability, and while they would need

re-certification by the FAA to increase their maximum all-up weight (too time-consuming and expensive), this gain gives pilots an edge they never had before with a roomy, comfortable and capable helicopter.



An Angolan side gunner with his AK alongside an Executive Outcomes Mi-17 is flanked by South African pilot Carl Alberts (left) and Saurimo base commander Hennie Blaauw, who had originally served with distinction in the Recces during South Africa's Border Wars. (Photo: Author's collection)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PROFILE OF A MERCENARY: HELICOPTER PILOT ARTHUR WALKER

[Ending the slaughter of innocent civilians in Sierra Leone] was the job some three hundred well-equipped and motivated [PMC] soldiers managed to do…

Ed Royce, former chairman,
United States Senate Africa Subcommittee

A distinctive feature of so many of the mercs with whom I've spent time over two decades is their laid-back insouciance. They would come back from an attack – where they had possibly been under heavy fire – and judging by their reactions and banter, it might have just been a stroll along the beach.

Of them all, Arthur Walker – he flew chopper gunships in the Angolan war and was subsequently involved in numerous hot spots around the globe – is arguably the least fazed when the bad guys empty their magazines in his direction. Add to that the fact that he won two of the highest awards for bravery under fire while serving in the South African Air Force. He was at the controls of Alouette gunships both times. Interestingly, he has never been "properly" wounded. "A few scrapes and scratches, but little to write home about," were his words.

Take another recent example. When not "on the road" Arthur lives with his family in Pretoria, one of South Africa's major cities. As usual, mid-afternoon, he'd fetched his teenaged daughter from school and had just pulled up in front of the garage when two cars suddenly boxed him in.

Moments later three men brandishing handguns emerged and surrounded his car: one opened the far-side door and manhandled his daughter out into the road before putting the muzzle of a gun against her head. In recalling this event, Arthur stressed, “one needs to bear in mind that South Africa has one of the highest murder rates in the world and hijacking cars is almost as commonplace as road accidents… this is Africa!”

Arthur reacted instinctively. He immediately exited from his side of the vehicle with his own handgun drawn and by the time everything had come to a halt, he had his daughter’s assailant clearly in his sights.

“And let’s face it,” he remonstrated afterwards, “when that happens, you are dealing with one of the critical moments of your life… I had perhaps three seconds to make the ultimate decision…”

At this point, clearly emotional in recalling the event, he stopped talking for a few moments.

“So I took the only course open to me, aware that there were three attackers and the others could drop me at any time. I placed my gun on the roof of my car and said quietly: ‘OK guys, let’s cool it! You want my car, you take it.’ ” At which point he ran around to the other side of his vehicle and pulled his daughter away from the man who had been holding her.

“The bastards wasted no time. Two of the attackers jumped into my car: I hadn’t even had a chance to switch the engine off while the third man backed away the car in which they had all arrived and drove off. Seconds later my car was on his tail.

“I reported the attack to the police, but in this country that’s a pretty useless exercise… they didn’t even bother writing it all down, never mind following up…”

This Pretoria attack was unusual in another respect, because what does set Arthur apart from the others in his league is that once at the controls of his gunship, he never allows anything impede the need to “finish the job.”

One example of this attitude was the rescue of 22 sailors held hostage by pirates aboard the Panamanian-registered freighter *Iceberg* for three years off the coast of Somalia. Several crew members had died during this period and others were savaged and tortured by their Somali guards. The *Iceberg’s* chief engineer had had his ears cut off because he “did not listen;” then they crushed his leg with a steel bar so that he could not escape.

Working closely with Roelf van Heerden, the mercenary commander of ground forces that eventually forced the pirates to yield, Arthur used his gunship with a Soviet-era PKM machinegun mounted at the port door to maximum effect to harass the Somali bandits. In the process his machine took quite a few holes in the fuselage.

Having brought some heavier weapons – including a Soviet 82 mm smoothbore B-10 recoilless gun as well as RPG-7s to bear – the onslaught ended 12 days later when the pirates, using mobile phones, called their leaders to negotiate a truce through diplomatic elements in the Yemen. The Puntland Government agreed to exchange the hostages for the freedom of the pirates who were holding them.

That was the first time an independent military group had rescued a group of hostages from captivity while still at sea.



Arthur Walker was the highest-decorated fighting man in the South African Defence Force before he joined Executive Outcomes as a mercenary aviator. Of the only six *Honoris Crux* decorations (Gold) handed out during the course of the 21-year series of Border Wars (and South Africa's equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor) Arthur got two. He is seen here with one of his squadron's awards at an air force base near Pretoria. (Photo: Author's collection)

Arthur was also involved in one of the most savage firefights of the entire "Border War" period in South Angola.

This was the Battle of Cuamato. The author was there as well, having been dropped into position by Puma helicopter with a bunch of Parabats… South African lingo for members of their crack Parachute Battalion. He was attached to Charlie Company, which – together with several other units – was responsible for clearing enemy ground positions and it was Arthur Walker's job to provide "top cover" with his gunship for the men on the ground.

But, to quote the famous maxim, "no battle plan survives contact with the enemy," and the 1981 fight for Cuamato provided a whole series of surprises for South African forces. The intention was to use the deserted village as a forward logistics base, while an area operation was mounted to seek and destroy guerrilla camps, including what was thought to be their western headquarters.

On the afternoon of January 15, six Alouettes and four Pumas flew 60 miles to a position just 20 miles north of the Angolan border in readiness for the operation due to commence the next morning. Apart from the Parabats, there were also troops from 32 Battalion, the elite unit that accounted for more enemy losses than any other in the South African Defence Force. With Charlie Company, they were busy securing the perimeter and checking out the surrounding area, when… Contact ! One of the patrols had come across a previously unknown and completely unexpected Angolan army strongpoint just miles north of the village that gave its name to the battle.



Arthur Walker went on to fly helicopter gunships as a mercenary for several years in Somalia, working for a unit founded and owned by Erik Prince, originally of Blackwater fame. He seen here alongside the antiquated Alouette III gunship that he used in Somali ops. (Photo: Roelf van Heerden)

It was just before last light, and as Arthur recalls, “there was no idea that this base even existed. It certainly wasn’t on any of our maps, so clearly, our intelligence was fundamentally lacking.” The contact call was soon followed by a report that two of the troops had been wounded and one man killed. A helicopter extraction was requested.

“Captain Mike McGee and I went off in our two 20 mm gunships to secure a landing zone for a Puma (already up at Cuamato) to fly in and extract the casualties. To our surprise Mike and I came under extremely heavy anti-aircraft fire, with even RPG-7s being fired up at us,” said Walker.

The open ground with its sandy soil and light grass cover was traversed by Soviet-style zigzag trenches, straight out of the manual, with numerous firing emplacements and positions for 82 mm mortars. There were berms and banks providing extra cover, together with underground bunkers.

A complex mesh of tracks traversed the entire area showing where the Angolans had moved back and forth, making it all the more surprising that the strongpoint hadn't been spotted from the air. The thorn trees that are normally dotted across that part of the country had mostly been cleared to provide fields of fire… or for fuel, leaving only the occasional small bushes.

"Our troops on the ground threw yellow smoke to mark their positions and then Mike and I proceeded to attack the base to suppress the AA fire to allow the Puma to come in. Because it was now getting dark, the sky was filled with tracer… dramatic, especially for guys watching from the ground."

The estimated 120-150 Angolans dug in around this previously unknown base were well armed, with three emplaced 14.5 mm ZPU-2 twin-barreled anti-aircraft guns firing an effective 300 rounds per minute. Against these the Alouette gunships had their single, laterally mounted 20 mm cannons, which had to be fired from a low and relatively slow orbit for accuracy.

"We'd see the muzzle flashes when they were aiming towards the helicopter, and tracer would follow. It seemed to head at us almost in slow motion, just like in the movies, until suddenly it was whooshing past our heads. Of course we'd fire back, aiming 'down the tracer' towards the muzzle flash. It wouldn't have worked in the daytime, though."

"My engineer/gunner was Sergeant Danie Brink, and he took on the AA guns until we ran out of ammunition." (The gunships normally carried 150 rounds each.)

"I broke off out of orbit and called Mike, telling him that I was going down to re-arm… we certainly hadn't given up the battle yet," says Walker.

"Mike suddenly called on the radio that he was coming under heavy fire and was going to crash. We were flying at about 500 ft above ground level while we were in orbit. Under those conditions, if you come under fire it's best to get down low, fast." But in his rapid descent McGee must have become disoriented, which is why he thought he was headed into the dirt.

"In the darkness I couldn't see him," said Arthur, "so I turned around to look for him, put on all my lights and told him to fly towards me. But hell, that had the immediate effect of my helicopter suddenly attracting fire from just about everywhere. But it did give Mike the opportunity to recover, and I then escorted him clear."

As the two gunships moved away, remembers Arthur, it was time for some serious evasive maneuvering in a bid to interfere with the enemy

gunners' aim, using sharp turns and altitude changes.

"Mike followed me back to the base where we landed and shut down to re-arm, re-fuel, but more important, to reassess the whole situation. We soon realized it was pointless to go back. We couldn't have four gunships orbiting the area in the dark. At the same time, the position where the South African casualties were lying was too close to enemy, a mere 200 yards or so from their lines."

By the end of the first day's action there were five of the attacking force wounded, as well as two from Charlie Company dead. All had to be evacuated on foot and through the night back to Cuamato town.

While all this had been going on, says Arthur, "we still hadn't assessed what was down there. We weren't made aware that what had been hit was not a relatively low-key guerrilla camp, but a pretty strategic Angolan army base."

That same night, the South Africans determined to move on the enemy position at first light. And that's when the next major surprise arrived. Judging by past behavior, the enemy could confidently have been expected to evacuate the base during the dark hours. But not this time…

Those manning the defenses at the Angolan base were waiting for the South African attackers when they arrived at first light and the battle went on for several hours, until all their positions had been overrun. There were still more casualties, including this author who, in the melee, lost all hearing in his left ear.

The entire attack, headed "Into Angola with Charlie Company," makes up the first chapter of Al Venter's *War Stories* by Al Venter and friends. The book was published by Protea Books in Pretoria in 2010.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“OPERATION IMPOSSIBLE” – ON THE RUN ACROSS AFRICA

The first time I met Jim Maguire – he’d served in the Royal Marines and in Rhodesia’s Special Air Service – it was at the behest of one of those shadowy characters that South Africa seems to produce in abundance. They’re invariably charming, well educated and erudite. Also, most of the time they are broke and flit about on the periphery of illegality.

In this case, with the man who introduced me to Jim, I was dealing with someone who managed to successfully pass himself off as a former member of South Africa’s finest. He was so good at the ruse that while he’d never served in any of South Africa’s elite combat units, he managed to get himself voted into the chair of the South African Special Forces League. How he did that is anybody’s guess and some of the old fighters are still kicking themselves.

Then, while living in Constantia, arguably one of the plushest – and most expensive – suburbs in the Southern Hemisphere, he went on to ingratiate himself with Mark Thatcher and Simon Mann while those two characters were living in Cape Town.

Thatcher, for those who aren’t familiar with London’s social scene, is the son of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. He evaded jail for his role in a sordid escapade by paying a fine of several millions. For his part, Mann – a scion of the famous British brewing family who had earlier been linked to the South African mercenary organization Executive Outcomes – wasn’t as fortunate. He was caught, as the saying goes, on the job.

Mann was with dozens of others aboard an aircraft that was transiting

Harare while en route to Equatorial Guinea. The moment the aircraft stopped, Zimbabwe security forces went on board and arrested them all. Initially, those involved were told that they were en route to pick up all the weapons they would need for the “uprising”. Which begs the question: just how stupid can you get?

Who in his right mind would even consider touching base in what must arguably be the most paranoid country on the continent of Africa? Surely, one must ask, did the plotters really believe that Robert Mugabe was going to help a bunch of white freebooters overthrow the government of an equally-demented fellow black president?

It all makes for a marvelous treatment by some illustrious Hollywood film producer. John Milius, my old friend, are you listening?

The person at the core of this conspiracy must remain nameless, if only for the sake of his son who is stuck with that contemptible father, though everybody involved with him at the time will be aware of whom I’m talking. I actually fingered him in an interview I did for CNN International the day that Mark Thatcher was released from jail. Though he threatened legal action, nothing ever came of it.

His coup de grace was helping Messrs. Thatcher and Mann set up the infrastructure for a mercenary force to invade the oil-rich island of Equatorial Guinea.

Like much else that this fellow touched, that illicit venture also turned sour. It also meant that just about all the South African veterans involved in that invidious African escapade ended up behind bars. They served time either in Zimbabwe or at Malabo’s notorious Black Beach prison, where some of those arrested have since died. Mann, following a spell in Chikurubi Prison in Harare, was extradited to Equatorial Guinea. In a blaze of publicity, he was brought to trial for trying to overthrow the government. As we go to press, he is still being held at Black Beach Prison, which word has it makes Chikurubi look like a provincial Hilton Hotel by comparison.

In the 1970s and 1980s Southern Africa’s wars attracted a lot of these freebooters, almost all of them labeled soldiers of fortune.

Among their number were a dedicated bunch of former professional soldiers. Most were former Special Forces operators and quite a few had served in either British or American units.

These were people like Peter McAleese who went on to write his classic *No Mean Soldier* (Orion Publishing, London) and American Vietnam vet Chris Clay who eventually made a name for himself while serving along the Angolan border as an officer with South Africa's crack 32 Battalion. Clay also spent time in Rhodesia's war and the last time I spoke to him he was working in the Ivory Coast.

Their stories are all riveting. The majority were involved in shadowy cross-border strikes. There was intrigue by the bucketful as well as the kind of duplicity that would please the likes of John le Carré. Betrayal sometimes featured prominently and many of those sucked into this military-politico maelstrom would die.

One such operation might easily have ended with the deaths of the two principal players. Launched from South Africa in 1988, it was handled by two British nationals, Sammy Beahan and Jim Maguire, both former British Army Special Forces types who ended up fighting in Rhodesia's war. They went on to serve in the South African Defence Force in Angola, again in a succession of elite units.

While still in South Africa the two men got involved in one such escapade. It ended with one on the run and the other captured and tortured by Zimbabwe's North Korean-trained security goons. In their efforts to get away from their pursuers, they twice swam across the Zambezi at night. But more of that later…

In the process, Sammy Beahan was arrested and served ten years in the same maximum-security prison at Chikurubi where Simon Mann was held some years later.

Jim Maguire originally told me the story. The object of the exercise, he said, to find a way to rescue a bunch of former Rhodesian SAS operators being held at Zimbabwe's maximum-security prison. He wasn't specific about how this task might have been achieved, except that somebody back in Pretoria thought it feasible.

Whoever that was, he had the presence of mind to label the task "Operation Impossible", which just about says it all.

One of the men held in Chikurubi Prison at the time – and obviously somebody who they hoped to free – was Kevin Woods, the same person who had worked as a double agent for the South African apartheid government as

well as for Mugabe's Central Intelligence Organization in the 1980s. Somehow he'd let something slip and eventually Woods spent 20 years behind bars, five of them on Death Row. Woods was released in 2006 after he received a presidential pardon and has since written a book about his experiences through those dreadful years.

Exactly how Jim Maguire and Sam Beahan intended to implement their plan is uncertain. There was some talk among their colleagues of possibly storming the prison and flying in a clutch of helicopters to assist with the escape.

What becomes apparent, as they recount some of their unconventional military exploits, is that the two men are about as professional as they come. Both were seasoned Special Forces operators who'd seen regular service in several wars on three or four continents. By the time they set out from Pretoria on what was regarded at the time as a low-key assignment, they'd made themselves thoroughly familiar with both the military and political parameters of all the countries in the region, Zimbabwe and Botswana included.

If successful, the South African military planners felt, "Operation Impossible" might very well have a considerable impact on relations between South Africa and Zimbabwe. If not, their clandestine efforts could easily be disavowed. In the end, they were. Consequently, two highly experienced operators were compromised and hardly anybody was to lose any sleep following that misadventure.

Sammy Beahan, the team leader, had served for nine years in the British Parachute Regiment. During this time, he'd completed four tours in Northern Ireland, spent a couple of years in Berlin and another two conducting internal security tasks in Hong Kong on the Hong Kong/Chinese border. Beahan left the Parachute Regiment with an Exemplary Service Certificate.

From there, he went to Rhodesia where he served a couple of years in the Rhodesian Light Infantry before transferring to Rhodesia's SAS. His tasks involved secret missions into the three neighboring states of Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia.

For a while Beahan joined another British national, Chief Superintendent Mac McGuiness of the Rhodesian Special Branch, who worked closely with Lieutenant Colonel Ron Reid-Daly's Selous Scouts. McGuiness, an old hand at ferreting information from unlikely sources, was responsible for the

Scouts' intelligence. He also ran various clandestine internal operations from his Bindura base in the old Rhodesia.

After Zimbabwe's independence, Beahan chose to head for South Africa rather than accept Mugabe's new political dispensation. He'd spent years trying to kill the recently installed President Robert Mugabe and at that stage felt it made no sense working for him. Once ensconced in Pretoria, Beahan joined the SADF and was given a role in Chief of Staff Intelligence (CSI).

Though he remains guarded about the outcome of the venture that he undertook with Jim Maguire, what does become clear is that in South Africa, things didn't pan out as expected. It didn't surprise many of his colleagues that he returned to Zimbabwe to serve in the newly revamped Zimbabwe National Army. Others maintain he was an SADF plant.

Whatever the truth, that didn't work out either, so it wasn't long before the always-cocky Beahan was back on South African soil. Among his old "oppos" in the South African Army was Jim Maguire, somebody with whom he had worked closely for many years while in Rhodesia. The two men shared a host of common interests including as much beer as possible as often as their women would allow. Bottom line was that both were British, each had served in elite UK units and they'd also spent a lot of time fighting what they referred to as "gooks" in Central Africa.

Like Beahan, Maguire's track record is commendable. At last count he'd served for 20 years in nine different elite combat regiments in three countries. Since then, he has worked as a private military contractor east of Suez for many years, including lengthy spells in Iraq.

From 1972 onwards, James Maguire served in Britain's Royal Marine Commandos and completed three tours of duty in Northern Ireland. He also took part in the 1974 Cyprus conflict, besides completing the ultra-demanding Royal Marine Commando selection and training cycle as well as the British Paratroopers' course.

Maguire: "I went to Rhodesia in 1977, joined the Rhodesian Special Air Services, completed their selection, training cycle as well as their jump course and spent time as an SAS operator.

"From there I transferred to the Selous Scouts, completed their selection and training and worked with them for a while, mainly on border or cross-border operations. Afterwards I transferred back to "A" Troop, Special Forces – a specialized group conducting offensive operations."

But just about then Rhodesia ceased to exist. Almost overnight Zimbabwe emerged from the shadows of conflict as the new national entity. Moreover it had Westminster's blessing and shortly afterwards became a member of the United Nations.

Maguire saw little hope in the long term for the fledgling African state and it wasn't long before he'd followed Beahan to Pretoria. Having also been inducted into the SADF, he too was posted to CSI for a period, together with several other colleagues from Rhodesia's Special Forces.

"From CSI," says Maguire, "I transferred to the Reconnaissance Wing of 32 Battalion. There I completed their selection and ended up in operations that sometimes took us deep into Angola." Among his contemporaries was Chris Clay, as well as Eeben Barlow, the man who went on to found the illustrious mercenary organization that called itself Executive Outcomes.

His next step, having successfully completed one of the most demanding selection courses in any man's army, was a move to 1 Reconnaissance Regiment – also known colloquially as the Recces – where he spent several years. By the end of 1987, he'd transferred to 5 Recce.

Fighting Angolans, recalls Jim Maguire, was interesting work. Almost all of it, while attached to the Recces, took place behind enemy lines.

Most assignments involved collecting intelligence. Occasionally the unit was tasked with harassing Angolan Army (FAPLA) lines of communication, planting mines or organizing standoff attacks that might involve bringing in an air strike or perhaps directing long-range artillery onto a specific target. While it took a while, the guys who handled South Africa's G-5 155 mm long-range guns were good. They consistently proved their ability to home in on a target within about three or four shots, quite often assisted by a spotter perched nearby, usually up a tree with a view of the battlefield.

Like Beahan, Maguire was a major player in trying to dislodge a combined Angolan and Cuban force from Cuito Cuanavale. It was a massive semi-conventional effort and lasted for almost a year. Ultimately the Cuito bridgehead became the focal point of war in the entire southeast Angolan region.

By early 1988 Maguire had been involved in conflict of one kind or another for 16 years, most of it on foreign soil. Another event that took place that year was the start of a series of combined efforts by South Africa, the

Soviets, Moscow's Cuban cohorts as well as Portugal – the former colonial overlord – to make a determined effort to end the Angolan war. It had been tried often enough before, but even a Kremlin numbskull could see that this was a conflict that was going nowhere. It was then that a series of concerted peace efforts on the part of the Americans produced dividends.

Since the Soviets had taken a mighty knock the year before in what some historians like to refer to as "The Battle for Cuito" (where three Angolan brigades under Soviet, Cuban and East German leadership had been routed during the course of an eight-month campaign) Moscow seemed more amenable to bringing the campaign to a halt.

For the Soviets, the Angolan military had become problematical. Luanda got all the hardware it needed from the Russians but simply put, the Angolan Army couldn't fight a decent battle, never mind a war. In the eyes of some of these East European strategists, Africa had suddenly become superfluous to the Politburo's needs. Afghanistan had suddenly acquired a higher profile and, with the Soviet economy in a tailspin, the Angolan effort had to go.

Meantime, on the other side of the firing line, some Special Forces personnel – including Beahan and Maguire – were put on standby for other operations, including one that involved the possible snatch of former Rhodesian and South African soldiers from Zimbabwean prisons.

Initially, the idea was that Maguire and Beahan would go into Zimbabwe and pose as tourists. They'd avoid the limelight of directly entering "Mugabeland" and take a circuitous route through Botswana, Zimbabwe's neighbor to the southwest. The idea was that once inside, they'd undertake reconnaissance for what was to follow.

Jim Maguire and Sammy Beahan flew nonchalantly into Botswana's biggest airport at the capital, Gaborone. It had been arranged beforehand that a contact would be waiting for them outside the terminal and he'd have with him a set of keys to a vehicle. That done, they'd head north towards the Zambezi River and Zimbabwe.

As Maguire remembers, on arrival in Botswana there was the customary tension associated with that initial phase of what was to become one of the hairiest clandestine operations on which he'd ever embarked.

"What we didn't want was to get into a situation where we'd have to talk to people who might question us, or worse, recognize us.

“Botswana – in terms of population – is a small country. But you never knew whom you might run into: old friends from the Rhodesia days, or someone who knew you from home. A hint of suspicion, and it’s over,” he declared nonchalantly as is his usually unflappable penchant.

As planned, the two men spent the night at hotel close to the Zimbabwe border and then waited until late afternoon the following day before moving on.

“The idea was to reach the border post and cross just before last light. If there were problems, it’d be easier to set in motion our escape and evasion plan… better in the dark than in daylight…

“Then we ran into two Irish hitchhikers: they were actually at the customs post when we got there. One of the Botswana customs officials asked if we could give them a lift to the nearest hotel since we were all heading that way.”

Maguire: “Sam and our two newfound Irish friends went through all the formalities and had no problems. But then the customs officer in charge of our entry discovered that he didn’t have the necessary customs documents needed for vehicles.

“No problem. One of the other officials suggested that I drive his colleague to the nearby border post to pick up the necessary forms and bring them back. We did this, me being aware that in the interests of good neighborliness, we’d probably avoid having our vehicle searched,” Maguire recalled.

“What I hadn’t expected was passing through a control point at the other border crossing where, to my horror, the policeman on duty at his desk had a full-face photograph and description of me before him. I saw it lying at his elbow and at that stage he hadn’t yet clicked that it was a picture of me. I couldn’t help think just then that it was an incredibly bad stroke of luck. From where I stood in front of the officer’s desk, I could see another page or two below my ‘wanted poster’: other documents that probably contained all Beahan’s details.



There are tens of thousands of hippos to be found along the length of the Zambezi River and its tributaries. Jim Maguire and Sammy Beahan would have been aware of their presence when they twice swam across this great river in desperate bids to avoid their pursuers. (Photo: Caroline Castell)

“For a moment I was too shocked to react. Clearly, we’d been shopped. These buggers had been waiting for us.” By then, said Maguire, the policeman also clicked.

“Twice he looked at me and then glanced down at the poster on his desk before reacting. It was something almost instinctive. In a loud voice he called for the rest of his colleagues and told somebody to bring a gun.”

Within seconds Maguire was completed surrounded by uniformed officials. By their immediate reaction, it was clear that the group was elated: they’d caught themselves a South African spy. The gathering became even more animated when the customs man told them that there was another man waiting to cross the border at the control point from which they had just arrived.

Maguire says that about then, things quickly developed in his mind. He could hear a police officer in the next room on his radio telling his Zimbabwe counterpart “We’ve got them! We’ve got them! Come quickly!” He could hear several more messages going out, this time, to members of a Zimbabwe Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) team in Livingstone.

Meanwhile, a group of Botswana officials had gone back to the original border post to fetch Sam and the tourists. All four travelers were taken into

custody and crammed into the back of the car that Maguire and Beahan had used to travel north. With a police vehicle in front and another bringing up the rear, the party was escorted to the local police base, followed by more radio calls to Zimbabwe.

“We could hear the Zimbabwe guys telling the Botswana Police that if we tried to make a run for it, they’d already deployed their people on the ground. About then the Botswana authorities started a search of our car and somebody noticed that there were items hidden inside the door paneling.

“About then, Sam and I were exchanging glances. We knew that hanging about there any longer would be suicide and since we were both familiar with the drill, I didn’t have to tell Sam what to do. We’d revert to the Special Forces basic escape and evasion doctrine of not wasting time. It was time to make our move.

“While there were a lot of customs and police officials around us, those in our immediate proximity weren’t armed. Within moments, we’d knocked them down and made a run for a tall security fence that surrounded the base that we had a pretty good look at earlier. In the rush that followed, customs and police officers made a grab for our legs as we tried to scarper over the fence.

“But they couldn’t stop us. We were in pretty good shape in those days and Sammy’s as tough as old boots. Also, it’s no secret that I can handle myself in a tight corner. We probably only avoided being shot because there were so many of their own people milling about.

“Once over the fence and into the bush on the other side where it was dark, we disappeared into the shadows and put some distance between us and them.”

At this point Beahan turned to Maguire said something about having hurt his ankle. It probably happened in the jump. The injury was serious, he said. “Either he’d broken a bone or had torn ligaments: which meant that he could hardly walk,” reckoned Maguire.

With customs, the police and everybody else who could walk, run or crawl on their tracks, the two men made their way as best they could in the direction of the Zambezi River. Beahan limped badly all the way. It was only a few hundred yards, Maguire recalls, but it was a tough haul and he had to support him all the way.

Their hopes leapt as they emerged on the riverbank and Maguire sprinted

ahead towards a speedboat tethered to a makeshift jetty. Beahan arrived immediately afterwards, and having got on board what was clearly a customs patrol boat, they pushed off into the stream which was flowing at a rate of knots. And while they had mobility, Maguire suddenly realized that there were no keys. The boat couldn't be started.

"So there we were, drifting downstream and just about everybody in town lining the river bank screaming at us, a wild, gesticulating mob that sensed blood. At that point the first of many shots pierced the gathering darkness.

"Obviously we couldn't stay where we were. Also we couldn't get away any faster than the current allowed. Added to which, there was still enough light to silhouette us against the sky and give those taking pot shots at us a sense of direction. That was when we decided to swim for it.

"It was a helluva decision. Bullets were plopping in the water all around the boat. If we stayed where we were, we'd probably be hit. Also, we'd already accepted the ramifications of the predicament we were in: we'd be facing the current of a fast-flowing river that was notorious for crocodiles and hippos. But we went ahead anyway.

"By the time we reached the northern, Zambian bank of the river, it was dark."

Jim Maguire is uncertain about the time it took to swim across one of Africa's great waterways which, at that point, was easily half a mile across, perhaps more. It was a difficult swim, but they got there anyway, though for a lot of the time they were in the water there were searchlights scanning the river.

Maguire: "Once in Zambian territory, we had more problems, not least, trying to move through an extremely dense and compacted reed bank that stretched out almost a hundred yards into the river from the bank. It would have been a cakewalk with a panga [machete] but all we had was our hands. In any event, by then, we were up to our necks in mud.

"That meant, that to make any kind of progress, we had to force down the reeds in front of us to get some traction for our feet. We'd move forward a few inches, lift ourselves onto the embedded reeds and then repeat the process.

"We didn't have time or the energy to give any of the creatures that might have been in the water around us more than a passing thought: this was damn

hard work and it took a while. There were crocs there, we knew – there are crocs along the entire length of the river, some really big mothers – but they didn't bother us.

"Meanwhile, there had been a lot activity on the opposite bank. People with torches had running up and down along the water's edge and were joined soon afterwards by some fast boats with spotlights. Everybody and his uncle were out looking for us.

"Finally we made it to hard ground and, for a little while, we rested. At least we'd made Zambia. I can tell you that we were mighty pleased to find nobody there waiting for us: communications between north and south just then were obviously not that hot.

"I took a few moments to look at Sam's ankle. It had taken a real beating moving through the reeds. But we couldn't stay there, right alongside the water, because it was all pretty exposed. In any event, the Zimbabweans would have alerted Zambia's militia or army and they'd soon come looking for the two white bastards who'd given them the slip. In fact, it wasn't long before we saw some lights heading our way.

"Not long afterwards we spotted fires being lit along the river bank and could hear people moving around and shouting. This new group of searchers was getting closer. It was a progressive process, with the searchers carefully checking one area after the other and though it took some hours, they slowly edged closer.

"Since our options were limited, we decided that we probably couldn't do better than get back into the water."

As quickly as Beahan's ankle would allow, the two men moved a distance down the Zambian bank where they discovered a primitive wooden dugout canoe hidden in the reeds alongside what looked like a hippo path.

"We maneuvered the *makorro* towards the stream and got in. Trouble was, it sank under us after about a dozen yards. That was something we hadn't bargained for. So we started swimming again." Quite a bit time had elapsed by now but there was no time to contemplate any kind of alternative.

It was a long haul back to the Zimbabwe side of the river. As Maguire recalls, it seemed to take an eternity and by now they were aware of crocs and hippos because there was some movement in the water around them. Also, because there had been a huge amount of effort and the chase had been going on for many hours, both men were near exhaustion. About all that was

positive was that most of the search parties on the Botswana side of the river had moved further downstream.

"It was a long swim back across the Zambezi, and by now we were really bushed. About all that kept us afloat was the thought that if we stayed in the water we'd drown. The current didn't help either; it was fast moving and constantly swirling around us.

"Finally we made it to dry ground. We got out of the water and made our way to a clump of bush, just as dawn was breaking."

Leaving Beahan behind to try to strap his ankle, Maguire set out to assess the situation before the world around them came alive.

He needed to establish their position as quickly as possible, but found conditions confusing. What soon became apparent was that the current had swept the two men quite a long way downstream. Their immediate problem then was that they weren't quite sure whether they had drifted into Zimbabwe or possibly were still in Botswana.

"By the time I got back to the hideout, Sam's ankle was worse. The ankle was swollen like a cricket ball and after all that exertion, he couldn't even stand on it.

"But what I'd found from my little sortie was that we'd actually made it back to the Botswana side of the river. In fact, we weren't all that far from the road that we'd intended covering the previous evening. The way I calculated it, we must have been about four or five miles from the hotel where we'd spent the previous day.

"That means decisions. Since Sam couldn't move, we decided that he'd stay in the hide where we'd holed up. I'd go back to the hotel and phone through to our contact that our operation had been blown. Obviously I'd do it innocuously enough and in code. Also, this would give me an opportunity to see what arrangements I could make to get us out of this mess… we had money, we had somebody that we could talk to and they hadn't caught us after all that effort that probably involved hundreds of people. We were actually quite optimistic," said Maguire.

"Sam stayed in the hide while I walked through the bush to the hotel. Both Sam and I had an escape and evasion kit sewn into our belts with a couple of thousand British pounds between us. At the hotel, I made the call from the lobby phone to the appropriate person and gave him appropriate phrase to

indicate that the operation had been compromised. I had to do that so that other members of the team in other locations could be warned and take appropriate action. If I was compromised, I reckoned, then so were they, and as it turned out afterwards, I was right.

“I also told my contact that we were stuck and that Sam was in a bad way. Discreetly, with appropriate security in mind, I asked him what we should do and whether he was in a position to lend a hand considering that we were at the other end of Botswana from him. Which was when he told me, almost in as many words, that we were on our own.

“After I’d finished talking, I exited the hotel, though meantime I’d spent a bit of time trying to clean up as much as possible. I’d got to the hotel in a filthy state from the mud, the reed beds and swimming the river, and although it was still early, I got some quizzical glances from the staff.

“Just as I walked out of the front of the hotel, a guy who I recognized as a one of the local game rangers we’d met a couple of nights before was on his way into the lobby. He just emerged from his game-viewing Land Rover. He saw me, did a double take at my appalling condition, and said ‘Hi’. Which was when he jokingly added: ‘Gee, you look like you’ve just swum the river.’ Taking a chance, I replied that that was exactly what I’d done. I added that we’d been caught smuggling emeralds in Zambia and had been chased by the Zambian police. It was plausible and he smiled, adding that I was damn lucky to get away.”

Jim Maguire then asked the game ranger if he’d like to make a quick few bucks. He offered him 500 pounds in cash if he’d drive him back to where Sam was and pick him up. The man didn’t hesitate a moment and the two of them got into his Land Rover and headed out.

Driving back towards the river, a convoy of Botswana Defence Force troops passed the Land Rover, heading in the opposite direction. The Zimbabweans had obviously alerted the BDF, and though Maguire said nothing to his new companion, it was clear that security forces throughout the area were mobilizing. They’d shortly push out patrols and search parties and set up roadblocks. Fortunately, the two men weren’t stopped because the hunter’s Land Rover was obviously well known to everybody in the area.

“So we drove along to the area where Sam was, and after checking that there was no roadblock or patrol nearby, I left the vehicle, fetched Sam, and helped him back to the road.

“At this stage, Sam and I’d manage to share a few thoughts with Sam while walking. We were aware that with new security measures that would shortly be put in place, we’d probably not be able to cross into South West Africa because of the BDF alert. All we could hope for would be to try to get as far away from the immediate area as quickly as possible. If we didn’t manage that, we’d be picked up for sure. Even going back to the hotel would have been dodgy: they’d watch all the tourist haunts and probably distribute copies of the same photos we’d seen in the border post the evening before.

“We’d had weapons stashed in the car, but they were already history. Also, things might different had Sam had not been injured. Had he not hurt his leg, we’d probably have tried heading out overland. Unarmed, with one of us injured and the two of us totally debilitated – and in daylight in a strange environment – it wasn’t a sensible risk.



Kazangula, the cross-Zambezi link where three African states - Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe – conjoin, and where the two men escaped from custody, is an extremely busy little river port where ferries operate throughout daylight hours. The river is a quarter-mile wide in places and swimming across even once would have been a remarkable feat during the day. They did it twice, both times at night. (Photo: Author)

“The only option we were left with was our newfound ranger friend, but even there time had become a factor. Sometime soon, with all the sudden military activity, he’d realize that there was something going on. Which was when I asked him whether there was an aircraft company in the area where

we could perhaps charter a plane. We had to get away from the area, I explained, adding that the Zambians would be putting the word out about us.

"His reply astonished us. Yes, he said, he had a friend at a nearby farm who owned a light plane. If the price were right, he'd probably be happy to fly us to Gaborone. Which was when we drove to his friend's farm, had a brief discussion and found that for 1,000 pounds Sterling, he'd get us to the Botswana capital before nightfall.

"In Gaborone, we walked directly from the aircraft and, without glancing either right or left, left the terminal building. The first taxi we saw took us to a hotel on the edge of town where we took two rooms. Sam meantime busied himself with making a few calls. We needed to know how bad our situation was and whether there were any instructions for us.

"The reply was explicit. Things were bad, Sam was told. We could either remain in-situ and keep a low profile at the hotel until things cooled, or possibly try to reach the South African border. The choice was ours. Also, nobody was coming to fetch us. When Sam and I spoke about the situation a little later, it was obvious that we were in Shit Street. Also, I'd I lost my passport in the Zambezi, and was in Botswana without any kind of valid documentation. Nor did it help much that we'd used almost all our evasion and escape funds to get to Gaborone.

"There we were, we agreed, in pretty grim straits. We had no vehicle, no clothes, no money with which to hire a car and possibly only enough cash for two or three nights' stay at the hotel. More important, the Botswana police had my photograph. That would now go out nationwide and it was only a question of time before someone came knocking at the hotel and asked whether they'd seen two these two Englishmen…"

The two escapees finally decided that the risk was too great to stay put at the hotel and lay low. They'd make a break for the South African border, but it would be on foot and well away from the main trunk road.

They estimated that the trudge would be something like 20 miles. While they'd use the road as their reference point, they'd walk way out in the bush and only approach close enough to be able to see it every so often to ensure that they were on track. After which they'd veer back into the scrub. It was a pattern the two men soon got used to.

They did quite well for about half the journey, but it was a slow process

because of Sam's ankle. Maguire could see from the start that his buddy was in serious pain. Moving across irregular terrain in the bush, crossing fences, working their way through culverts and thickets only made it worse. At one stage he thought it'd swollen up like a small football. Finally, at about the halfway point, Beahan said he couldn't go on. "Normally he's tough as they come; the guy had had enough," Maguire explained.

The two men stopped a while to consider their options. Beahan suggested that perhaps if he stuck to the more level terrain alongside the road, things might go a bit better. If he heard a car, he said, he'd duck into the bush.

"I didn't like the idea and I said so. I was worried about roadblocks, I told Sammy."

During their flight from Northern Botswana to Gaborone, Beahan had asked the pilot and the ranger – who'd come along for the flight – whether they were aware of roadblocks on the main road between Gaborone and South Africa. They stuck to their emerald smuggling story and said that because the Zambians and Botswana people worked hand-in-glove they could still be searching for them, even this far south. The pilot and his friend were optimistic, assuring the other two that from past experience along that route – they did the trip fairly often – there were no roadblocks. But as Maguire commented afterwards, he still didn't want to take a chance.

"At this point, Sam and I had a disagreement. He said that it was physically impossible for him to continue in the bush. He'd go on the side of the road. I told him flat that the choice was his. I was staying in the bush.

"That's when we split up. Sam moved across to the road, and I started back into the bush. And what was really sad was that he hadn't gone 100 yards from that point when he walked straight into a BDF roadblock. Three guards stepped out of the bush at the side of the road and pointed their FNs at him and when this happened, he shouted to me for help. I did what I thought was right and ran straight out onto the road to help him.

"Sam was there with a trio of Botswana troops pointing their rifles at him. One of the guards came right up to me and stuck his FN up my nose.

"Who were we and what we were doing there? That was the first question. We told them that we were British tourists and that our car had broken down a few miles up the road. We were on our way on foot to look for help. We also said that we were quite pleased that we'd run into them.

"However, their commander looked us up and down for a few moments

and said, just like the Zimbabwean border policeman, that we were South African spies. ‘You are under arrest,’ he told us.

“Then, surprisingly, two of the Botswana soldiers walked off towards the main roadblock position, apparently to radio in that we’d been caught. That left only one of them to guard the two of us.

“We looked at each other, which was when I muttered quietly under my breath that we should make a run for it. We should get back into the bush, I reckoned, but Sam didn’t answer.”

Just then a car drove up and slowed. Maguire thought it would stop, but it didn’t. As it came alongside, he quickly moved around its front towards the other side of the car. The vehicle was then was between him and the soldier. But Beahan didn’t follow and the car moved off again. He’d already told his partner that when he shouted ‘Run!’, Beahan should try to get away as well as he could.

Maguire: “That’s when I shouted ‘Run!’, and pushed off smartly into the bush. I can’t remember whether the soldier fired at me or not as I was running for everything I was worth. All I remember is that Sam stayed put and was taken into custody.”

Jim Maguire continued with his efforts at evasion and escape, successfully as it turned out, and finally crossed the border into South Africa. He has since spent a lot of time working security as a private military operative east of Suez and elsewhere.

Sam Beahan was formally arrested and transferred to the Zimbabwean authorities. What Maguire and others learnt afterwards was that the first thing that they did was to ask him what he’d done with his beard. Then they told him to roll up his shirtsleeves and show them his tattoos.

Maguire: “Sam had never worn a beard. But I’d always done so. Also Sam was never tattooed, but I have large tattoos, one on each forearm.

“Obviously it was me that they were looking for. In fact they thought it me that had been caught at the roadblock. Not only had the person who’d betrayed passed on photos and a detailed description of me; a lot of personal information was also transmitted.

“I only discovered this afterwards that the Botswana authorities had arrested two men the day before we infiltrated the country. They were accused of being South African soldiers. Meantime, the Botswana Defence

Force and all internal authorities were put on a high state of alert.

"Under normal circumstances, we should have aborted the operation. But the key personnel of our team in Pretoria met to discuss the situation and the consensus was that we wouldn't get another opportunity for the rescue, so we agreed: we'd go ahead and take the risk, we told them. We had friends and colleagues in Chikurubi Prison, all of them former operators who needed help.

"The fact that we were betrayed from within makes it a bitter pill to swallow."

Jim Maguire: "What only emerged much later was that Sammy, once in Zimbabwe custody, was badly tortured. That punishment went on for a very long time. More important, it was meted out by a combined team comprised of Botswana security people and a Zimbabwe CIO group who were already waiting for us to arrive.

"One of the Zimbabwe CIO personnel involved in the torture had actually been staying in the same hotel in Gaborone, the Botswana capital, where Sam and I stayed the night before we intended infiltrating Zimbabwe. In fact, the Gaborone Government had decided to kill Sam – they were going to use the waterboarding treatment with hessian sacks – when the CIO instructed their operatives to keep him alive for further questioning.

"Despite the beatings and the torture Sammy kept his mouth shut. He never compromised his friends and those colleagues in Zimbabwe that he knew about. He could easily have done so because he knew everyone's names, their locations, the various RV points, future plans, transport arrangements and the rest. He allowed them all good time to escape.

"He then spent ten years in a maximum security prison with hard labor. He got extra time coupled to an extra-severe sentence precisely because he refused to provide the information that Harare was looking for."

Jim Maguire's evasion and escape is listed as the longest ever to take place in the history of the South African Defence Force. The person that "shopped" the operation – the mole at the heart of it all – will, for the sake of his family, remain unidentified, except for his initials: GB was killed a while later working security in Iraq. The consensus among his former colleagues was that his actions were based solely on greed. Worse, they cost several

operatives their lives and quite a few more decades behind bars in Chikurubi. Those taken into custody by Mugabe's security detachments as a consequence of GB's subterfuge were horribly tortured…

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE IN IRAQ

In former Police Officer Lovett, I discovered a man whose mind could best be described as a series of locked cupboards guarded by the cherubs of self-discipline. Someone in Arkansas had suggested that he was the original no-nonsense cop, in part because he'd worked undercover most of his life and then become a mercenary. Before Baghdad he had been in Kosovo, in the Balkans, operating with 150 others out of Ferzi, a small town just beyond Pristina.

At the time of writing, Gregory Lovett is in Afghanistan, having been in Iraq off and on since December 2003, and thereafter involved against the Taliban.

He started working for a large American conglomerate that had a multi-billion dollar security operation with bomb dogs searching for explosive devices, or, more commonly, IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). From there he was delegated to what the brass like to term Executive Protection. "We protected civilian contractors and now and again some foreign diplomats," he explained.

One of his everyday jobs involved taking people along Baghdad's notorious Route Irish, the road out of town, from the Green or International Zone to the international airport. It was a trip that had its moments because people died doing it.

"Most of us were ex-cops or former United States Marines. And who better to protect you running up and down the road at 100 mph than a bunch of law enforcers?" As he likes to say, the people he worked with knew what to look for on the roads and how to react when others drove menacingly.

"Also, we're pretty good at getting out of traffic jams: more important,

we’re taught how to make decisions on our own. The marines are a lot like cops; they’re also an independent bunch and aren’t afraid to make decisions when they have to. Not at all like some military personnel who won’t go to the bathroom without asking their officers for permission to do so.”

Almost all security companies hire former Special Forces soldiers and in Iraq and Afghanistan they have their place, Lovett reckons. “But for the most part these otherwise crack fighters are clueless when it comes to running the roads. As police, that’s what we did for a living: we were trained in driving tactics and small arms.”



Bandit Island 2004 K-9 mission. (Photo: Greg Lovett)

Most Special Forces guys, but not all of them, have only been involved in training, some for almost their entire careers. Until the Gulf Wars and Afghanistan, there was little for them to do. Only an exclusive little clique had actually been onto enemy soil or even shot at. Most had never exchanged fire with somebody who shot back.

While in Special Forces units Stateside, many of the operators stayed only long enough to get the “Badge”, Lovett reckons. Then they left to do something else. “But if you ask them… they’ll tell you they’re all Special Forces.”

Some are good guys… they make outstanding combat groups, good

security teams. But as with cops, there are some that shouldn't be there. So it goes both ways and both groups usually bring an interesting mix to the table.

As for close calls, reckons Lovett, there have been a few in Iraq. He had been in country about a week or so – that was early January 2004 – and was waiting in line to call home.

"There were about 30 of us outside near the Bob Hope Chow Hall and that was when the bad guys started dropping mortars on us. The first one landed in a very large pile of dirt just across from where we were. Had it landed 10 ft. in any other direction, it would have hit the asphalt parking lot and the casualty rate would have been bad. But it didn't: all we had to do was shake the dirt out of our hair.

"Then on a beautiful day in May, we were running Route Irish into the BIAP area which is the Baghdad International Airport. About a mile ahead of us, going the same direction, was a group of guys from Blackwater and they got ambushed. Everybody onboard their rig was killed… all four of them. It caused a massive traffic jam at the time, as it was obviously intended to do, with a lot of very well armed bad guys on both side of the highway. We had to fight our way out of that mess, but had we arrived a minute earlier, it could just as easily have been us."

Then came 9 April in the same year… anniversary of the fall of Baghdad in 2003. Says Lovett: "We were in the Green Zone, once again heading for the airport. We'd intended leaving from Check Point 12, but that gate was closed because the EOD guys were checking a suspicious car. So we waited a while and decided to cancel the mission and return up north to Taji.

"When we got back to base camp we were told that there had been several convoys ambushed and hostages taken. Had we rolled out to BIAP as originally intended, we'd have been smack bang in the middle of it."

Lovett's views about the vehicles they use are interesting. As he says, most security companies prefer the Suburban or the Tahoe, which are six or eight-seaters depending on configuration and are quite spacious inside. "We regularly used the Tahoe Z-71 because it just got to be the toughest four-wheeler ever made for this kind of work.

"The way we ran the road was usually in three-vehicle convoys. Each had a driver and a first officer, together with one or two shooters in the middle seat and a tail gunner in the back. The principals – the people we were

protecting – were usually in the middle vehicle. It's actually quite a sight when you run up behind one of these convoys on the highway."

The main weapon of choice in Iraq for PMCs – private military contractors – is the AK-47. As he comments, "it is both dependable and easy to acquire in-country.

"Our tail gunners in contrast preferred one of the belt-fed weapons, like the PKM or the RPK (which shoots the same round as the AK). But we did have one .30 cal. Browning, which made some very reassuring noises when it opened up. The sound of freedom…"

It is Lovett's view that what is going on today in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan and other Third World deployments, is of immediate consequence to the majority of private military companies and contractors, whether they be American, British or South African. Sources in Baghdad talk about 50,000 of these people active throughout the country, but he reckons a more realistic estimate would be somewhere around 30,000, which, he concedes, is still a helluva lot.

"Every one of these individuals costs good money and the United States taxpayer is fitting the bill for much of it," he comments.

I'd first made contact with Greg Lovett when he'd returned from Baghdad in the summer of 2004 and we kept in touch ever since.

I'd gone looking for him in a small town in northwest Arkansas with my son Luke, but though he was around, he wouldn't bite. Lovett has worked undercover for so long that he is wary of strangers who ask questions. Eventually I got to speak to him on the phone and we agreed to meet in New Orleans a week later.

Because of that contact, Lovett features prominently in *Cops: Cheating Death*, a book I was working on at the time and which deals with policemen and women who had been shot and survived[1]. He'd been doing school patrol work at the time and ended up intercepting a 12-year-old who intended to kill his teacher. Instead the kid opened up on Lovett who took five hits from a 20-gauge shotgun. As this former cop admits, it shouldn't have happened, but it did: the youngster had hunted a lot with his dad, so he could handle the weapon pretty well.

Lovett's views about hostilities in the Arab World are startling, in part

because he sees things the way they are, not as someone else might think they are. In that sense, he is the ultimate pragmatist. Moreover, he likes the job and has no axe to grind, though he can be blunt about the industry's shortcomings. I quote:

"Overall, private security companies seem to fall into two areas now that things are starting to get 'civilized' here in Iraq. We have certain rules that we're obliged to follow and our activities are carefully monitored by a myriad of organizations, quite a few of them eager to bring us freelancers into disrepute. As a result, our hardest taskmasters are our own bosses. Step out of line and you're on the first plane home.

"In both Iraq and Afghanistan you have your 'high speed' companies such as Triple Canopy, MPRI, Armor Holdings and the rest. They are all reputable organizations, or most of them, anyway. They do everything from executive protection to guarding ambassadors. Quite a few have dog units, called K-9 units. Others handle static guard duties at embassies and palaces. It can obviously be expensive, but these people are good at what they do because they've been trained for it.

"These companies are usually hired for the jobs by what is termed 'Other Government Agencies', as well as larger entities that are not necessarily hampered by budget restraints, like the American State Department, or the Department of Defense where they might do 'unsavory' jobs like supply runs or civilian escort duties.

"Obviously, quite a few of the firms have the political pull to get the big-money contracts that matter, companies like Halliburton, and in the past, Blackwater, now called something else. They're here for the long haul and in this kind of unstable political and military environment, you kind of get what you pay for."

As Lovett explains, the vast majority of companies in Iraq are connected in some way or another with an American-backed program termed "Reconstruction of Iraq." They provide protection for construction personnel: they guard the engineers involved or handle the road convoys that get the people to work and back again as well as a variety of ancillary activities.



Greg Lovett on ops as a private military contractor with a dog unit in Afghanistan, early 2014. (Photo: Greg Lovett)



Brad Monore Taji Iraq 2004: Typical American PMC. (Photo: Greg Lovett)

For instance, construction companies with contacts to rebuild or refurbish facilities or installations have to provide protection for their workers. One example of money spent, as elucidated by Gregg Nivala, a spokesperson working out of the American Embassy in Baghdad, was that $2 million of a $9 million dollar contract budgeted to exhume mass graves in the southern Muthanna Province of Iraq was paid to a security firm to guard the diggers who were pulling the bodies out of the ground. That, Nivala explained, was almost a quarter of the total amount. Without protection, he suggested, it would never have happened.

But, as Lovett points out, as with all private companies, the bottom line is profit and that, in turn, leads to something else in the jargon of multifaceted security work called “acceptable losses.” This refers specifically to equipment and personnel that can be written off, all of which needs to be factored in against what a company can make out of deal.

On the negative side, he points to some construction and security companies of the “fly by night” variety. Some of these “other” organizations come into Iraq and get a contract with the Department of Defense. Or perhaps they’ll acquire a security job with the State Department and to get this right, they need to under-bid just about everyone, often by millions of dollars. Meantime, they know very well that they will only operate in the country for a year, or possibly two at most. Then they’ll take the money and run, especially since in this business, companies get a large proportion of the contract cash up front. Also, they’re usually allowed a generous period of grace to get things moving.

The truth is that some of these groups never even get off the ground, while there are others that eventually get going – after a fashion – but are unable to provide the services for which they were contracted. It is these groups that end up giving the rest of us who are actually doing the work a bad name.

“What I have personally observed, is that these flighty companies will hire as the front man a security manager, usually a solid and experienced individual with good Special Forces credentials coupled to a string of military qualifications. He is not aware at first that he is being manipulated, but his bosses then end up relying on him not only to hire security officers but also to train them. This can be difficult when you’re dealing with individuals with little or no prior military experience, and usually from Third World countries.

“And when you accept that the going rate for a ‘qualified shooter’ is anything from US$500 to a $1,000 a day – which is average – you’re talking pretty big money.

“But then I am also aware of companies that hire what is known as ‘Third Country Nationals’ – or TCNs – as shooters for as little as $50 a day: they pay even less for static guard work at check points. Then they wonder why the so-called ‘bad guys’ – the al-Qaeda or Sunni insurrectionists – are able to get into usually well-secured areas and create havoc. When they achieve that much, they take lives in the process.”

According to Lovett, the majority of the TCNs are from India, the Philippines, Nepal and elsewhere, though there are increasing numbers of

potential recruits from South and Central America.

Most of these people, he concedes, are hard workers. They are doing a job in trying to provide for their families. But at the end of it, the majority shouldn't be at the business end of an automatic weapon because they have almost no combat experience and quite often wouldn't recognize an ambush if they landed in the middle of one.

Lovett: "As for one of the K-9 companies I was familiar with, they were charging their clients $2,000 a day *per dog*. Multiply that by 30 dogs and it comes to something like $60,000 a month, per animal. And since they paid their handlers a paltry $5,000 a month and provided only the most basic facilities and equipment, the profit margin was immense. That particular company had anything between 30 and 40 dog handlers on their books and was making a killing."

And again, he stressed, it was all being done quite openly with American taxpayers' money.

What is also happening, remonstrates Lovett, is that many of the qualified and reputable security companies that arrived at the beginning of the Iraqi debacle established for themselves some very good and reliable bases of operations. These were the ones that were instrumental in getting construction and trucking companies up and running and, in turn, got the funding for these projects.

But as everybody knows, in most cases, government contracts last perhaps a year, and as with every business involved in this scenario, they have to resubmit their bids on an annual basis. So now that these security companies are on relatively firm ground and running smoothly, it is perhaps only natural that they should look at ways of expanding their profits… all part of the Western economic system.

At the same time, these firms have been good at what they did. Some were outstanding. With time, everybody makes a mistake or two, but generally things went pretty well. Moreover, it was axiomatic that since qualified security companies provided good protection, hostile actions and losses were kept at a minimum and it wasn't long – in spite of a lot of things that went wrong on the periphery of the civil war – before things appeared to be reasonably secure.

Indirectly, you now had clients beginning to think that they no longer needed the same level of protection as before. So they would toy with the

idea of saving money by cutting back on operational or protection costs, which, of course, is absurd. “It’s kind of like cancelling your car insurance because you haven’t had an accident.” Then things begin to snowball.

Enter into the equation a host of security companies that start by underbidding their competitors, the very same security companies that originally paved the way under the most dangerous conditions. The newcomers are security firms that pay their shooters and static guards $50 dollars a day (and sometimes less), coupled with what can generously be termed “less than stellar” living quarters. It doesn’t need a rocket scientist to see where all this is headed.

Concurrently, with most people in the United States wanting their boys out and questioning the billions of dollars spent on these ancillary but vital security services, Washington simply had to find a way to cut down on spending and lower troop numbers.

One of the immediate results is that the bids go not to the most qualified companies or individuals, but rather, to the cheapest, or what the politicians like to call most “cost efficient”, which is ridiculous.

Greg Lovett’s comments, made in an e-mail from Baghdad prior to his return to the United States in December 2005, are instructive. The bottom line, he told me, was that the overall security situation was far worse than when he got there in 2003. “And it’s not going to get any better soon,” he reckoned.

“We have to face the fact that the civil war dominates just about everything and let’s not kid ourselves, *this is a civil war*, not an insurgency. It is just that nobody wants to put that kind of spin on it with the media grabbing at anything that can make America look bad. Not yet, anyway.

“I used to drive from here at the airport area in Baghdad to the Green Zone on Route Irish by myself. I did so many times in the past. Naturally, it was risky, but that was the job… it came with the package. Now that very same Route Irish is proclaimed to be the most dangerous stretch of road in the world.

“Curiously, we have a bit of the old *déjà vu* here: the same kind of problem that our people experienced in Vietnam. The enemy is extremely active. It changes its methodology and it tactics, as well as its deployments, almost on a daily basis. Being fanatical, it has a regular supply of human

resources from which to draw, which is why we've had so many suicide bombings. Those people take enormous risks and they are able to cause huge damage.

"On our side, some very experienced, extremely well-qualified people are brought in to cope with the war. They're the ones who are expected to turn things around. Then you hear them whisper about not being allowed to do their job. Others complain about the inability to complete their missions. But they're not too vocal about it, because such things aren't good for career advancement.

"There are others, I fear, who would rather we *look* good, which they feel is a good alternative to *being* good. And heaven knows 'we' don't want to offend anyone while the nation is fighting a war. Right now I'm involved with the mail convoy security… although I have been moved up the 'food chain' and have been riding a desk for some time. I still manage to sneak outside the wire from time to time for some fresh air.

"Since 2003 our operation has lost nine personnel, all of them killed in enemy action. And that doesn't include the wounded."

Going back a bit, Greg Lovett was in Kosovo for almost five months, from August to December 2003. Opportunities then opened up to transfer to Iraq late in 2003 and though he took a few breaks home, he stayed there until April 2007, which was when he returned semi-permanently to the United States and went back to his old police unit.

"At first I wasn't really sure how I went from the north-western part of Arkansas to beautiful downtown Baghdad. Looking back now, I'm also not sure that I had any choice in the matter. If the gods of war decide that you're going to be there, I doubt that you can change that.

"While in Kosovo I was assigned to base security at Camp Bondsteele. It was all a bit of an eye-opener: a taste of what lay ahead.

"In Kosovo there were two types of people assigned to security, largely restricted to former military personnel and people who had worked in law enforcement. As soon as we hit the ground we were given our uniforms, a room and a bunk assignment as well as a bunch of training schedules.

"I went through two weeks of training before doing a proper duty like standing guard. However for me, it almost ended before I started. On the second day we were being trained on base security rules and regs when the

instructor gave us a break. I walked outside with the rest of the class and was standing there talking to some of the other guys.

"The next thing I know one of the instructors or 'Black Hats' – a man called Ishun Richards – took up a position right in my face: his nose couldn't have been more than an inch from mine. Ishun was a former Marine DI or drill instructor and, as they say, 'Once a Marine, always a Marine.'

"Ishun demanded to know, but not in the nicest possible way, where my cover was? It's what they call body armor in this industry.

"Without thinking I replied. 'It's inside.' You'd have thought I'd just insulted his wife. Long story made short, I never again went outside without my cover. On the flip side, Ishun and I went on to become good pals and when I moved on to Iraq, I was able to get him hooked up and we were soon working together again."

Lovett didn't regard the security situation Kosovo as too taxing. But it didn't take him long to appreciate that the Balkans weren't what he was looking for. The crunch came after a couple of months.

"Security is security, or so I thought. Our project manager was a former Delta Operator (or that was the word he liked to put out). And though security affecting all those coming into the base was excellent and the only people who didn't get searched was the commanding general and his staff, everybody else was stopped at the gate.

Now like I said, being a cop and having dealt with criminals for years, you learn the way they do things, how they operate and their manner of thinking. All the civilian workers on the site were either Albanian or Serb and their vehicles were searched on arrival. The same with those arriving on foot: all were patted down on the way in. Notice that I said… *on the way in.*

"At the time I was working at the Base Defense Operations Center, or as we called it, BDOC. One time, talking with the project manager, I asked him why nothing going out of the base was checked.

"That was when a look came over his face, like he had just been asked something incredibly stupid. 'Now why would we want to do that? It would be a total waste of resources and manpower,' was his retort. My reaction almost got me sent home again and going by past experience, I suppose I should have learned by then to keep my head down and my mouth shut.

Anyway, I explained to the man that the Kosovo Police as well as the

UNMIK Police (US police assigned to train the Kosovo Police) had been doing raids and in the process had recovered significant amounts of American military-issued clothing and equipment, together with an assortment of other items that were government issue. I explained there were only two US bases in Kosovo and it had to come either from us or the other base.

“Next thing I’m in his office and being told that everything I’d said was classified. He asked where the hell I’d heard all this ‘rubbish.’

“It was common knowledge among the police, I replied. In fact, I went on, it had even become a topic of conversation in the chow hall. The man was adamant: He said I to keep my mouth shut, not spread ‘rumors’ and get back to work. It was about then that I decided that the project manager was an idiot who would rather that we *looked* good than *be* good. So I started to search for other options.

“Soon afterwards I was able to get hired by a K-9 company looking for dog handlers for explosive detection and it sounded like fun. So I asked to be signed up. I was sent a first class ticket to fly from Kosovo to Amman, the Jordanian capital city, and my instructions were clear: Get yourself there, take a cab from the airport to a motel and check in. It all seemed pretty straightforward. I should have asked how I was going to get from Jordan to Baghdad and I’m glad I didn’t: the answer would have scared the shit out of me.

“Everything went smoothly until my plane tried to land in Jordan. Heavy fog had closed the airport, so we were diverted to another airport where some heavily armed troops were waiting for us on the ground.

“I must have had this worried look on my face because the Arab sitting next to me spoke good English and gave me a two-minute crash course on Middle Eastern culture and customs. He told me to put my money in one of my shoes and leave about $50 in my wallet. This was for what he termed ‘customs tax’, which those functionaries would demand once we got inside the terminal building.

“Of course, there was no argument about the money having to be paid, if only to get my passport stamped.

“I then asked him to direct me to where I was supposed to be staying. He told me he’d get me a taxi and pointed the driver in the right direction, which was how I eventually arrived at my hotel several hours later. I left the driver arguing with hotel staff about who was going to pay for the ride, which the

security company was supposed to cover.



Bill Bell, another American contractor in Iraq on K-9 mission. (Photo: Greg Lovett)

“After checking in I was told to eat, sleep and be ready to roll the following night. They’d be leaving the city sometime around two in the morning, the idea being to reach the Iraqi border as dawn broke.

“No problem, I thought. We were going to drive from Amman to the border with the military, or so I assumed.

“At the time set the following night, I walked out with my bags and saw three Jordanian taxis waiting, with spare tires strapped onto their roofs along with six or eight fuel cans. That alone should have suggested something different, but the next thing I was in the back seat with two other Americans with this little convoy of cars headed for Iraq. Hopefully, I thought, we would meet up with the military at the frontier post and get escorted in.

“The three taxis arrived at the border just as it was getting light and on walking into the checkpoint, all of us Americans were told to grab our weapons and all the ammo we could haul or drag. We were about to experience what one of them described as the ‘Desert Dash.’ ”

The vehicles involved drove as fast as possible and stopped for nothing. In a sense, recalls Lovett, it was a miniature “Hell Run” and ambushes were commonplace.

“It was about then that I seriously started missing my old DI pal Ishun yelling at me, and my warm bunk bed back in Kosovo. As it happened, our drive to Baghdad was without incident and we soon arrived at our new home.”

For the most part, as he explains, the K-9 operation involved a lot of work, but it was also fun. His assignment was to monitor Baghdad Airport and adjacent checkpoints.

“But we were also assigned to military units running missions outside the wire, as well as to other bases. More often than not, we did patrols with them, which was somewhat beyond the scope of the original agreement.”

Bill Bell, a former Vietnam veteran, was among his colleagues on the K-9 dog handling unit and as Lovett remembers, he was about as crusty and knowledgable as they come. “Bill was my mentor and he taught me some valuable lessons about how to survive. He also showed me a few tricks, like gathering up the weapons we’d seized on our raids.

“The military at Baghdad Airport would confiscate firearms hand-over-fist, and for the most part, they didn’t want to mess with them. So Bill and I soon had a nice stash of automatic weapons, which we cleaned and resold to other American contractors. It was a good bit of extra cash and served a purpose as well: nothing like having shooters out there with all the good stuff they need when they hit a problem or two.

“But then that private military company also started with its bullshit. Each month their directors would consider ways to ‘deduct’ more money from our pay. So once I began to have financial issues with them, and I starting looking elsewhere for PMC work.

“During one of my missions up north to the city of Taji, I had dealings with a security company that had a good reputation for handling executive protection. They were looking for additional shooters and drivers to protect civilian contractors, as well as some foreign diplomats. This was a motley crew, but at a glance you could tell these guys were tight and knew their business. I was more worried about being able to keep up with their really professional operators.

“So I moved across to Taji and it was great. Our project manager who

answered only to name of ‘Pat’, greeted me when I got there, handed me four crisp $100 bills as a cash advance on my next pay and told me to get some chow and clean my weapon.

“Our little group was divided into four teams, which were Alpha, Beta, Charlie and Delta. The Delta team was regarded as the elite, and I was assigned to Charlie as a shooter and driver and our team leader was a former marine by the name of Heath. Once again the majority of the guys were either cops or marines.

“One afternoon we were doing a run to Baghdad Airport and I was driving the lead vehicle. We were going merrily along when Heath suddenly turned to me and said, ‘Lovett, look around you.’

“As a driver, I replied, you didn’t look around. Instead, I said you focused your attention on the road: your shooters did the looking and the guy behind the wheel kept his eyes firmly on the road ahead. Period! Still, it was odd for Heath to make that comment. I told him that I didn’t see anything, which was when he said out loud: ‘That’s what I mean! There is absolutely nobody around… the streets are completely deserted.’

“And so they were, I suddenly realized. There wasn’t a single vehicle on the road, nor any civilians within our view. And for those who have been there, done that, you simply have to accept that when civilians are smart enough to duck out of the way, it almost always meant that some big shit was about to happen.

“But nothing happened. Soon the traffic started to reappear and things went back to normal… makes a person wonder about what the other side was planning and why they didn’t put it into effect: we could have been hit big time.

“As members of executive protection teams we often sent out our ‘scouts’ ahead to check sites on which the engineers would be working. We had several local vehicles that we used in order to blend in with the domestic scene in the city and even had a small pickup with a stock rack on the back for sheep or goats. We’d joke about getting ourselves a goat or two to ride around Baghdad for recon.

“Then, one afternoon, with Billy, Chuck and David on a reconnaissance mission, I was driving one of our ‘Hoop Dees’ that looked like a local vehicle. We’d all be dressed like Arabs, but only from the waist up, and obviously we’d have a bunch of firearms on the seats alongside us.

“Anybody who has been to Baghdad knows that its traffic can be deceptive. In places it’s a bit like downtown Dallas during rush hour, but with no traffic signals or any kind of control. On that day, while driving along, we noticed a car alongside us with two locals inside. There was nothing suspicious, until we looked at the load they had on their roof: strapped to the top, with rope, were several mortar tubes.

“Somewhere in the conversation that followed my pals and I decided these were the same the people that had been using mortars to blow up power stations: the same power stations that engineers we had been protecting had been working on.

“What to do? We couldn’t just shoot them… that would attract too much attention.

“Then Billy suggested we toss a grenade in the car and when it exploded it would look like a car bomb. Great idea! So we tried to parallel the vehicle in heavy traffic, not an easy job even in good conditions.

“We had just made a turn and we suddenly became grid-locked in traffic with nowhere to go but forward. At the next intersection ahead were two more of the ‘bad guys,’ also armed to the teeth and going through the motions of checking cars. As with every good civil war, you can never really tell the goodies from the baddies.

“Obviously we were in a fix: the roadblock could just as easily have been manned by Iraqi Police with no uniforms. Or they might have actually have been terrorists. But we’d already decided between us that we weren’t going to give them the opportunity to explain. As we inched forward we made a plan, quite a simple one actually: it is known in the terminology as ‘pray and spray.’

“Obviously our options were limited, but we were aware too that if we couldn’t get our vehicle out of the traffic we could ‘borrow’ one from the locals. We were still about three or four cars from the checkpoint when an Iraqi Police vehicle pulled up and two more of their people got out. Suddenly we had four armed men with whom to deal, but it seems the gods were with us again: a brief conversation followed, they all loaded up in their cars, opened the intersection and we were able to return to camp.

“It was a good story until Harris asked a simple question. ‘What would have happened if that car had been actually loaded with mortars and rockets and the rest and you guys didn’t put enough distance between them and you

before it all went off?'

"In the end, all good times come to an end. A few months later me and my colleagues were all told by the security company for which we were working that they wouldn't be renewing their contract with the State Department. So, once again I was looking for work.

"That was when I hooked up with Halliburton, the largest security company in Iraq, and it continued to be a learning experience.

"On arriving back at Camp Victory I was met by some former co-workers. Picked up at the airport by two associates – Ken and Robin – and taken to look at the camp, I was brought before Ray, the site manager, another Special Forces major in his day. His boss, in turn, was Dan, a one-time Navy SEAL.

"It took a bit of time for all of us to adjust to each other – them being military and me being a former cop – but once we got going and we learnt to accept our individual strengths, coupled to the basic resources available, it soon turned into an extremely effective operation. Issues and personality conflicts aside, the new posting soon became the best of both worlds.

"I soon found myself assigned to mail convoy security, which coincided with other operations that included dedicated military escorts, most of which were US Army National Guard or Reserve Units. Until then, I had had almost no dealings with either and my overview of the average 'weekend warrior' was badly flawed, even though these people were serving on active duty in Iraq. Like the rest, they were also taking the occasional casualty.

"I actually could not have been more wrong about them. One of the escort units had a female officer in charge, or as Lieutenant Fowler preferred to call it: OIC. Unusually attractive and under normal circumstances, amenable to deal with, she would smoke your ass in a heartbeat if she thought you might be hurting one of her guys, or even *wanting* to bother them.

"At the end of the day, I found Guard and Reserve units with whom I came into contact to be some finest troops around. They handled themselves well whenever push became shove and throughout, weren't afraid to mix it. In short, they were both enthusiastic troops and pretty well trained and I take pride in having known and worked with these folk. During the time I was with the mail operations we lost nine personnel altogether; some military and some civilian drivers.

"Not long afterwards, Ken, Ray and Robin all were transferred to other

camps. That was when I met my next boss who was Mike, a former Special Forces medic.

"At first I wasn't sure how to take him since his handle was supposed to be medical. But initial impressions can be deceptive. Mike pretty well knew the rules and expected everyone to follow them, but he had never spent much time around us law enforcement guys, so he wasn't sure how to take me either. After some give and take, Mike and I ended up great friends and we quickly learned to trust each other. From him I leaned more about the inner workings of corporate security and its role with the military than from all the other operators together."

War sometimes makes for strange bedfellows, Greg Lovett commented in one of his e-mails.

"One night Mike and I were at the OSI camp for a cook-out. There were all sorts of brass and others there, everybody dressed as civilians. We were talking to one of the translators, an Arab by the name of 'Tony' when I noticed three guys, also Arab and standing over by the grill. They looked normal, but I could tell they were not from the camp. Also, they weren't mingling with the others.

"I asked Tony who they were. He looked furtively around, and putting a finger to his lips, he whispered: 'Shhhh… those guys are three of the best Iranian cooks in Baghdad.'

"I didn't enquire further as to what they were supposed to have 'cooked.'

"After my three-years-plus of fun in the sun, I decided that perhaps the time had come for me to head home, though I wasn't sure for how long. I knew I would have a hard time adjusting to civilian life and now that I know the process, I can only imagine what regular combat troops go through when they get back from Iraq or Afghanistan.

"But I can confirm one important aspect. I'd always heard from the guys in combat that we were not fighting for our country, nor for any kind of cause. Instead, those people that find themselves in combat situations in strange corners of the globe today are fighting for the person right alongside them.

It's as simple as that…"

1 Al J. Venter, *Cops: Cheating Death*; Lyons Press, New Haven, Conn., 2007.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HOW EXECUTIVE OUTCOMES RAN ITS WARS

"Although the numbers involved were small – Executive Outcomes never had more than 500 men in Angola and were usually fewer, compared with Angolan armed forces of more than 100,000 men – it is generally regarded as having played a critical part in securing victory for the government forces…"

British Government Green Paper *Private Military Companies: Options for Regulation*: February 12, 2002

Executive Outcomes' Soyo adventure was eventually to become synonymous with what a well-disciplined bunch of war dogs can achieve in a regional "Third World" conflict. To other PMCs that might be active in remote, distant lands, it also offered what Kipling said of the Boer War: "no end of a lesson."

While "The Battle for Soyo" ranks right up there with EO having pushed Sierra Leone's RUF rebels from the precincts of Freetown, not much has appeared in print about either of these events, even though a lot of lives – the majority of them enemy – were lost in the process. What has been published so far about this extended African campaign has either been fragmentary or inaccurate, or in one notable instance, plagiarized.

What Executive Outcomes did prove during the course of its activities in Angola was that a solid command structure coupled to the correct choice of combatant, discipline that fringes on the exemplary and a level of dedication you don't often find among the ranks, it is possible for a commercial concern

to achieve good results under austere conditions.

In an article that I wrote for Britain's Jane's Information Group, I illustrated another reality: unconventional conflicts sometimes demand unconventional solutions. With decades of bush war combat behind them, this South African group managed to open doors that had been shut ever since Africa was vacated by the colonial powers in the 1960s and 1970s[1]. Some considered Soyo as arguably the toughest single campaign fought by any group of mercenaries.

Subsequent EO participation in Sierra Leone might have come close, but the level of competence among the rebels facing this mercenary group in the jungles beyond Freetown and in the approaches to the Kono diamond fields was no match to what Savimbi threw into the fray.

Considering the fact that there were a dozen or more battles fought in the sixty days that Soyo lasted and the exceptionally low casualty rate among company personnel, what took place at this isolated oil installation in the jungle was both a tribute to their tenacity and a remarkable level of professionalism displayed under fire. EO certainly dispatched any doubts that the company's adversaries might have had as to their efficacy outside the ambit of a conventional military force. And make no mistake; EO had critics aplenty, in Angola itself as well as in Britain, the United States and South Africa.

Looking at the broader scenario, some of Executive Outcomes' successes are said by insiders to stem from what Duncan Rykaart – a senior member of the company's original command group – termed EO's "four interlocking principles."

This codification – informal but strictly adhered to throughout the expanded campaigns that followed in both Angola and Sierra Leone – was much discussed during my two visits to EO positions in Angola in 1995. They were also to become the basis of many of the core values established by management. As such, declared Rykaart, himself a former Special Forces operator[2], they were sacrosanct. Any EO member ignored them at his peril.

Briefly, these fundamentals included air support for all ground operations, reliance on the individual in the field for a good level of personal initiative and basic common sense and finally, logistics. Since most of EO's men had served long and hard in their own country's guerrilla struggles – many of them having seen action in Special Forces regiments – they weren't unduly

taxed by these demands.

It was interesting that much of what ultimately took place under EO was dictated as much by the need to run an efficient business as to prevent loss of life in combat. The issue is perhaps best encapsulated by the credo, crude but emphatic, that was printed on some of the T-shirts issued to the men at Angola's Rio Lomba Special Forces training camp (about an hour's drive south of Cabo Ledo). Emblazoned across the back, in bold Day-Glo letters four inches high, were the words *Fit in or Fuck Off*.

The first of the four EO basics – that there was to be no ground operation without close air support – was routinely observed in Angola where there was never a shortage of government Hips and Hinds. These Russian rotor wings were used extensively in every punch-up into which the company was thrust. Angolan Air Force pilots flew some of them. Others were piloted by South Africans working for EO, though as the war progressed, the company itself increasingly played a more dominant role in air ops.



Two of the top field commanders serving with the Executive Outcomes mercenary group: Duncan Rykaart (left) and his good friend Hennie Blaauw, seen here along Luanda's once beautiful waterfront.

(Photo: Author)

In Sierra Leone, by contrast, things were different. Because that tiny West African state had no combat pilots of its own, EO at first made use of the Government's solitary Mi-24 gunship (the Hips only arrived afterwards). A big obstacle that needed tackling after their arrival in Freetown was that the South African company was obligated to employ those Russian pilots already there since they were contracted directly to the state.

In order to establish a more effective system, including more versatility, Executive Outcomes commanders had to find a way of bringing this asset under their control. This was not easily achieved. The Russians balked – as was expected they would – because it put a rather abrupt end to their monthly paychecks. They argued that they were doing a competent job, when in fact they weren't. Their idea of top cover was, as at Soyo a short while before, hovering somewhere above 5,000 feet. South African gunship pilots, in contrast, thought 50 feet might sometimes be too high.

The issue was resolved, according to Barlow's financial mentor Michael Grunberg, by EO using the clout it had accumulated from organizing the supply of pilots, parts and ordnance to protect Freetown. Thus the company took the helm and the Russians were ditched, but not before sabotaging the Hind's electronics. In this spooky world of point and counterpoint, one of the Russian pilots was later found murdered, though another source maintains that the death had more to do with diamonds and the Russian *mafiya* than mercenary activity.



Hennie Blaauw takes the salute at the passing out of an Angolan Army unit that he pout through its training paces with Angola's old "hammer and sickle" communist flag fluttering on the flagpole. Blaauw had spent a decade with one of the best Special Forces units in the world trying to destroy Luanda's old Cuban-backed government. (Photo: Hennie Blaauw)

Notably, it helped EO's cause that there had also been a fairly serious language barrier between the components. With former Soviets flying these machines, EO's ground forces couldn't communicate properly with the men who were supposed to be providing air support. As they explained to Valentine Strasser, the Sierra Leone leader, "when people are shooting at you, you don't need to waste time with translators." Strasser was usually too spaced out on cocaine to comprehend very much of what was going on around him, but that message came through loud and clear.

EO eventually brought its own Mi-17s into play. Two Hips bought from the UN in Angola (and still in that organization's white livery) were flown halfway across Africa, though that didn't prevent them from being "arrested" in Nigeria while in transit because their pilots were South African.

The second EO canon centered on initiative and good common sense… values for which the majority of Third World forces are not especially renowned. EO's command and control approach encouraged resolute, often

independent, action to achieve these aims. As Hennie Blaauw, another of EO's combat commanders in Angola, pointed out: "That sort of thing doesn't feature in the handbooks."

The third element comes back to discipline, enforced with a very strong arm. Anyone who stepped out of line – which excluded getting drunk as many times a week as you liked as long as you weren't smashed on duty – was put on the first plane home. Every unit, no matter how remote, had its rules, which were rigidly applied, even if it meant ousting someone from a pivotal position. Liquor-inspired fisticuffs was the main culprit here.

Two of EO's best and most valued combatants were peremptorily kicked out of the organization after they had tacked the British manager of Ibis Air – the airline founded by Buckingham and friends and used to bring in supplies – in a bar in Freetown. In a vicious attack that was described by one of those present as reflecting "a pit bull mentality," they broke the poor man's jaw and some ribs. He was rushed home on an emergency flight. Later, on both the Angolan and Sierra Leonean diamond fields, several of the men were fired for illicit dealings in precious stones. There might have been more, but diamonds are easily hidden and anyway, it was a difficult charge to prove.

The last was logistics. The key to EO's philosophy regarding conflict in Africa was, quite simply, that nothing happened unless it was made to happen. The South Africans had been dealing with African governments for a while by now and, without exception, government support throughout had been found wanting.

Said Lafras Luitingh, in charge of EO's operations: "All governments with whom we've been associated make promises. They make lots of them. They always do, especially when the bottle is being passed around. But we've found, sometimes to our disadvantage, that these promises were rarely kept. By morning they were forgotten. Consequently, if we were to deploy a force on the ground in some remote region, we'd have to keep it supplied."

If anything were needed by the men in the field – from a toothbrush or a *sjambok* (quirt) to a toilet roll – it had to come on the weekly (and eventually fortnightly) Boeing (Ibis Air) flight that was allowed unimpeded access to Lungi. It was also part of the deal that EO was not subjected to any immigration or customs controls.

As hostilities developed in Angola, the same system was adopted and relief flights became twice-weekly events after they commenced in 1994.

Michael Grunberg actually remembers being on the tarmac at a military field outside Luanda when the first of these passenger jets was delivered: it was still in its American Airlines livery. He also recalls that after regular flights between South Africa and Angola – and further north – had been introduced, EO pilots instituted a sophisticated logistics structure into the Sierra Leone operations envelope. It was passed on, together with the requisite international component, to the West African air controllers at Robertsfield[3].

Basically, in all theaters of military activity in which EO was active, the organization worked on the principle of the host nation providing the main component of military “muscle” in order to get the job done. With the odd exception, this included arms, ammunition and land support vehicles together with the basic military infrastructure that any army should be able to come up with. Men in arms from the host nation were part of the equation. At the end of it, the company took with it everything else that might be needed to keeps its force in the field.



A member of Neall Ellis' ground crew at military headquarters in Freetown with the country's only operational Mi-24 helicopter gunship. (Photo: Author)

Its main menu included direction, the men need for the task at hand, their personal equipment, food as well as helicopters for close air support.

The movement of EO troops, replacements and casualties was also the responsibility of the company. Apart from the two Boeing 727s, two other aircraft came from Britain, former RAF Hawker Siddeley Andover CC Mk2 twin turbo-prop transports that had previously been operated by No 32 Squadron for the Queen's Flight. Depending on criticality, these were used to evacuate casualties either to London or South Africa, with one being stationed at Luanda and the other at Lungi. Both had full aircrews on the company payroll and were maintained on the basis of a twenty-four hour standby. It was a notable advance from the Cabinda debacle where the first doctor only arrived weeks into the campaign.

The Andovers ended up playing a crucial role in the war, even though they

weren't tasked that often. For a start, the troops had the reassurance that if things did come unstuck, they would be airlifted to the best hospitals abroad, almost always with a company doctor in attendance. They could be airborne and on their way within an hour of a contact in the jungle, the Hips handling the first transit.

Lives were also saved by flying some chronic malaria cases to the tropical fever hospital run by Canadians in the Ivoirean capital. More than once a Boeing was diverted to Abidjan when a doctor believed a case was life threatening.

As Grunberg observed, you had to give the company its due: when it came to health concerns, "cost was never an issue."

There were several more EO planes, including two King Airs, but these mostly worked Angola and the rest of Africa. One of them crashed in Uganda in bad weather, killing a senior EO director. Also on company books was a Westwind jet located at Lungi and used by EO personnel for airborne surveillance work.

Curiously, with all these events taking place in Africa, race was never a criterion. Despite apartheid, elite SADF units that had fought the Border War and in Angola had been totally non-racial. In fact, they had just as many black troops as whites in their ranks, and, in some cases, in command positions over white soldiers as well.

The majority knew and understood the strengths and foibles of their officers and NCOs: after all, they had taken a lot of flak over the years in each others' company in operations that spanned more than a decade. What mattered a great deal to EO's bosses was that during that period, these people had not only fought together but also had sometimes saved each other's lives.

Luitingh viewed his company's black troops with immense respect. He regarded their welfare as his personal responsibility and would tolerate no officiousness towards "*my manne*" (Afrikaans for "my guys"). He'd actually served with quite a few in his Recce days and was on first name terms with many.

The company would be that much poorer without these black troops, he would say. They were strong, likable and every one in the team had seen a good bit of action in his day, which made them invaluable when things got rough.

He also liked to emphasize that there were few soldiers anywhere who

were able to display such remarkable versatility with squad weapons as the African troops under his command. In this regard, one of the men quipped, it was ironic that EO was now handling the same guns while working for the Angolan government that FAPLA and FAA had used against the South Africans when they were opposed to Luanda's Marxist regime.

A fundamental mistake made by the majority of critics of Private Military Companies – and one that never escaped the attention of EO – was the pigeonholing of those who were prepared to do this filthy work as criminals. The Press used various epithets, almost all of them unflattering. Others called them retards, contract killers or worse.

The perception in the civilized world, generally, is that mercenaries are semi-literate psychos with no scruples. And while EO always conceded the experience bit, it was only because that was what the majority of these veterans had been doing all along.

The truth is that some dogs of war could probably slot comfortably into all of the categories mentioned. Granted too, there is also the occasional psychopath and over the years, I've met a few in Rhodesia, the Congo, Angola, Uganda, Sierra Leone and elsewhere. But then most military establishments have the occasional loose cannon.

Looking at a broader canvas, it's axiomatic that the concept of killing people is repugnant to civilized people anywhere. While EO might have done an excellent job in destroying the rebel infrastructure in Sierra Leone, and before that, in forcing Savimbi to the negotiating table in Angola, the subject nonetheless remains unsettling.

There are those who feel that mercenaries indulge in violence for the sake of it. Yet anybody who has seen these people at work from up close knows that that is not true. At the same time, one has to accept that the ideal is blurred by perceptions spawned by the events of recent history, like "Colonel" Callan's mindlessly brutal behavior in Angola and what went on in the Congo before Mike Hoare pulled the operation up by its bootstraps. Obviously, there is an image factor here that needs to be dealt with. It is hardly flattering.

What went on in the Congo in the early days is perhaps at the core of it, compounded more recently by the doings of some American freelance operators who have since been charged with killing dissidents in Afghanistan. Mercenaries everywhere were done another disservice by the large group of South Africans who, at the behest of Mark Thatcher, the son of a former

British prime minister, and his sidekick Simon Mann, when they sought to bring down the government of Equatorial Guinea in 2004. Almost all of those involved in that fiasco ended up in jail, with some of them subsequently dying in prison.

In the earlier phase of the Congo, reports were reinforced by the blood-and-guts photos of smiling mercenaries holding aloft the decapitated heads of black men. This gory display of trophies was disgusting and it didn't help that some of these pictures appeared in the news magazines of the time, in Europe in particular.

Fast forward to the 21st Century and just about everything has changed. Today's professional soldier for hire, in the main, is a pretty ordinary guy. The majority probably wouldn't be out of place in your local police force. About the only thing that sets the contemporary soldier of fortune apart from the rest is that he is a veteran with a good run of experience to show for it. He's seen combat and he's survived.



Executive Outcomes troops man a strongpoint at the Saurimo air base in Eastern Angola. Severe security restrictions were imposed after a UNITA strike unit managed to penetrate the defenses of this base, destroy several helicopters and kill some of the men serving there. (Photo: Author)

These are also folk who are not only familiar with the multi-disciplined precepts of most regular armed forces, but are able to handle themselves with deftness under fire. Indeed, many have half a lifetime of military service and, to be blunt, they're dinkum proud of it.

Neall Ellis, who, on his own, *twice* turned the war around in Sierra Leone, is a case in point, though admittedly he is not your typical hired gun, if only because most air force pilots are a good ten or fifteen years younger by the time they return their flying helmets to the ready room for the last time. Still, there are few combat pilots who have had as much experience as Nellis.

In Executive Outcomes' first new phase in Angola, the first deployments took place to the east of Luanda and around the diamond fields of Lunda Sul.

Soyo too, once again required pacifying.

The company chose as its headquarters in the east the airport at Saurimo, not far from what was then still the Zairean frontier (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

While this contract was renewed a year later, and then extended again for a further three months, it was officially ended early in 1996. By then EO had about five hundred men in the field, the majority of whom were either in combat or busy training the FAA. South African mercenary pilots were also active throughout, and whether they were providing support for their own people or assisting the regular army, Angola couldn't have managed without them.

Several developments contributed towards Dr Jonas Savimbi finally signing an accord with the Luanda government in November 1994. The first, in February 1994, was the recapture by FAA – with a strong EO presence in support – of N'dalatando in Cuanza Norte. Until then, this little junction town, which lies about halfway between Luanda and Malanje, had been pivotal to the guerrilla penetration of the oil-rich northwest.

Four months later EO was engaged – in conjunction with FAA's 16th Brigade – in a three-month operation to retake the Cafunfo diamond fields (See Chapter 17). It was a blow from which UNITA never recovered.



One of several serviceable former Soviet BMP-2s deployed in defensive positions along the perimeter of Saurimo air base in diamond-rich Eastern Angola. (Photo: Author)

The alluvial diggings encompass miles of Angola's northern forest regions along the Cuanza River, and at that stage this valuable resource was supplying the rebels with about two-thirds of their diamonds. If Savimbi was of half a mind to continue with his war, he couldn't do without it.

Finally, when Huambo – Angola's second largest city – fell to the government after battles that left thousands dead in September of that year, the UNITA leader sued for peace.

There was another issue constantly being raised by the media whenever contact was made with the mercenary force. That centered on whether any mercenary in the pay of a foreign government could actually be loyal.

In Freetown, where journalists and mercs shared the same nightspots, the specter of divided allegiances would be raised more often than was necessary and, once or twice, led to blows. As some of the hacks were to discover, a tavern is not exactly the place to ask a tanked-up war dog about whether he's likely to defect to those whom he's fighting against.

Lafras Luitingh phrased it rather neatly when he said that while both Freetown and Luanda might have been pleased with what EO had achieved on the battlefield, "that didn't mean that we were always above suspicion."

He explained: "The black leaders who hired us would invariably judge us by their own standards. Of course, in their minds, that often made us complicit. We are, after all, marketable commodities and obviously, that would make us suspect."

Luitingh accepted that governments for whom his people (and other groups of mercenaries) fought had been "bought", as it is usually phrased, by a higher bidder. It happened within the ambit of the major powers as well, he pointed out; only there, turncoats are called spies.

Because of this, he suggested, there was sometimes a real fear among African leaders that if a better offer did come along, these hired guns might switch sides. "Our problem," he stressed, "is that we do what we do not for any cause, or ideal, but for money."

But, he declared, there were limits. The financial motivation was obviously something that any African leader could understand. But it was also true that he and his EO colleagues sometimes encountered suspicion about what some of them termed "real agendas." He accepted, too, that some of these misgivings stemmed from recent events. As he pointed out, "History has left the world with a legacy of betrayals."

This former Recce operator illustrated his argument by citing the Angolan experience. EO had won several key battles in a country that had seen decades of war. Soyo was a part of it. But it hadn't gone unnoticed that in achieving its objective, Executive Outcomes had lost several of its best men. Yet, he said, there were still senior Angolan officers who questioned, if not the company's allegiance, then that of several former SADF officers who were directing EO's efforts at winning the war.

"For instance, they would pose questions about our motives for coming across. After all, they argued, the two sides had been blood enemies for a generation. The switch didn't make sense, they liked to aver, and as a result

the suspicion bogey continued to worry us."

At the time that we discussed it, Luitingh hadn't been prepared to discuss this option in such depth before, though he'd alluded to it once or twice. It was a serious matter once we got into it and his voice urged a conspiratorial urgency.

"As contract people – PMCs, mercenaries, war dogs, whatever – our motives are always going to be suspect, if only because we fight for profit. So, the argument goes, what the one side offers, the other, feasibly, can top."

But that was not the way the company worked, Luitingh insisted. EO, throughout its brief career maintained stringent codes of conduct that were inviolable.

He used himself – well-dressed, clean-shaven, reasonably well-read and informed about matters military – as an example of today's corporate soldier of fortune. As one of the top men in the organization, everybody who had anything to do with Luitingh had to concede that he was hardly what one would have expected of a mercenary leader.

Lafras Luitingh joined the army after leaving school and for more than a decade, following his selection for South Africa's elite Reconnaissance Regiment, he did nothing but fight. His operations would sometimes take him on deep penetration insertions into Angola or Mozambique, either on foot or in vehicles. Other times they'd be put ashore in kayaks, launched from navy submarines or make clandestine high altitude HALO/HILO entries from SAAF C-130 freighters.

A tall, powerfully built man with a perennial smile, Luitingh had long ago learnt to become uncompromisingly aggressive when he had need to. EO was formed after he had left the SADF with the rank of lieutenant colonel. To his – and to everybody else's surprise – he found it relatively easy to combine the art of survival as a fighting man with the battles sometimes encountered in the rarefied atmosphere of Yuppiedom. Clearly, this tough and fit erstwhile combatant was a quick learner.

Very early on, Executive Outcomes established its own brand of definitive criteria when fighting a war. Being in the business of war, everything that the company represented stood or fell by the core values that it advocated.

EO offered Sierra Leone a feasible military solution for the kind of insurgency that the nation faced, in much the way that it had approached the

same issue before in Angola. Basics were coupled to good old-fashioned experience and a solid gumption to implement such programs to good effect.

Financial considerations, said Luitingh, were obviously the basis on which everything turned, or as he declared, “just about all we do starts and ends with money. Consequently, it’s a good to accept that we’re not into welfare. In fact, we charge what we think the market will bear. And to get to that figure, we do our homework.”

There was a time, he suggested, when the people of Freetown really did think that the company might switch sides, which was possibly to be expected because almost nothing in Sierra Leone was based on a handshake.

Also, he added, “the Russians had been running the Air Wing before we arrived and they had screwed the government so often that there were some who queried whether the South Africans wouldn’t do exactly the same. And when you’re faced with that kind of dilemma, a very real danger materializes when someone believes that you might betray him. They start to see shadows where there are none.” It was the story of Africa, he believed.

As in Angola, Luitingh and his colleagues quickly countered that perception by getting into some of the most aggressive battles against UNITA that its military leaders had yet observed and their own people taking still more fatalities. After that, things changed markedly, especially once the group had clocked up a succession of strikes that began to hurt the rebel movement. That included killing some of Savimbi’s most experienced field commanders, including some of the generals who were closest to him.



South African pilots serving with Executive Outcomes in Angola. Back, from left, J.C. Linde, Sonny Janecke, Lourens Bosch (killed in action in an air strike shortly afterwards) and Arthur Walker. Front: Pete Minnaar and Carl Alberts. (Photo: Arthur Walker)



Morning coffee in the mists around Sierra Leone’s eastern diamond fields around Kono. (Photo: Author)

Luitingh: “As soon as we could show that the other side was taking some serious losses, things began to ease up. Also, you don’t easily disregard casualties among people who are fighting for you.” It took a while, he added, but by doing what was expected, these “Demon Boers” – as they had been described in Angolan newspapers and radio broadcasts in the past – were able to show the Angolans that they had hired themselves a bunch of fighters that were both professional and reliable.

Similar problems were sometimes encountered in Sierra Leone. Luitingh took matters in hand at his first meeting with Chairman Strasser at State House by arguing – with some aplomb, one of his sidekicks commented – that to betray the Freetown government would irrevocably destroy the credibility that the company had worked so hard to foster. This applied not

only to Sierra Leone, he told the youthful Head of State – who was then still only twenty-five years old – but to governments on three continents to whom EO was then talking[4]. It was a point well made and even the usually verbose Strasser couldn't argue.

"I told him that we couldn't operate in this business without trust. We might be a band of brigands, I said, but we were an honorable band of brigands." The Sierra Leonean leader seemed to enjoy the quip.

Still more important, Luitingh explained, the company offered its services only to recognized governments. It wasn't interested in factions, or political parties trying to unseat rulers, no matter what kind of money was being put on the table. A year before, he disclosed, a dissident Nigerian group had approached EO with an offer of a hundred million dollars to train a guerrilla army to overthrow the tyrant Sani Abacha.

"You can do a helluva lot with a hundred million US. But we refused. We had no option. Once you get into that sort of thing, you're going to have the international community on your neck."

Such actions might also be classed international terrorism, he believed. "Then you're into something that involves big government, Washington, London, the United Nations, war crimes commissions at The Hague, Interpol. And then what? In the end we convinced Chairman Strasser that it was just not on and I know he believed us because he never again questioned our motives."

While Executive Outcomes lasted, it was active in almost a dozen African states. Apart from Angola and Sierra Leone, it accepted contracts in the two Congos, Uganda, the Sudan, Mozambique and elsewhere. For a while, towards the end, it guarded South African farmers from cattle rustlers, though that option eventually became too expensive for its client base.

Prior to going into any country – and while still negotiating the contract – EO would state very clearly and in writing what they were able to offer and exactly what it was that the company intended to achieve. Having agreed on something of a template, and with a contract price settled, other needs would be explored. These would include the extent of the threat, exactly who would fund what together with a timeline, sundry expenses and so on.

Discussions always involved the company's British associates and Michael Grunberg's experience was a reliable adjunct from the start. At a very early stage, these would detail finance, the apportionment of assets,

what needed to be procured as well as liaison with local forces. The small print would contain specifics concerning equipment and weapons systems. Ancillary issues included support aircraft, logistics and exactly what EO would be expected to bring into the country.

Other aspects detailed security, internal movement, bases and airports to which the mercenary unit would have access. To get a permit each time a man entered a security area would have been impractical. Consequently the company demanded blanket clearances and though this took a while in Angola, they got them in the end[5].

There was also the matter of accommodation, which, in places like Freetown and Luanda, included serviced apartments with attendant domestic staff. All this would be tabulated, and after a bit of a haggle, both parties would sign.

Perhaps the strongest attribute shared by senior EO personnel was that, as a group, the men all had intimate knowledge and understanding of the continent on which they worked. Just about everybody in EO had grown up in Africa.

On arrival at Freetown, the men were to discover a remarkably empathetic environment. Freetown's kids weren't all that different from those in the "Far South", as some Sierra Leonean newspapers would refer to South Africa. Consequently, none of the men who went into Angola or Sierra Leone labored under any of the misconceptions that might have encumbered Europeans and Americans who suddenly found themselves among disadvantaged folk.

It was that way in Somalia after the US Army arrived, something graphically depicted in Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down*. The book is a classic example of what takes place when you don't understand the people and the ambiance into which you're thrust. In such circumstances, mistakes lead to fatalities.

Also, the people around Freetown were indigent, as are the majority of black people in kwaZulu-Natal or the former Transkei. Almost from the time that Sierra Leone got its independence from Britain in 1961 the nation had been abused by a string of despots, as had South African blacks under apartheid. Similarly, these West Coast people were little different from throngs of Angolans or ethnic Namibians among whom these former South

African soldiers had worked and fought in the past.



Page 204 Former Durban mercenary Peter Duffy took this photo of senior Executive Outcomes executives with several of Angola's military leaders. Eeben Barlow is sitting third from the right

And as Luitingh pointed out as well, Africa is the ultimate leveler. EO personnel didn't have to be told what the region could – or could not – offer. It was taken for granted that conditions were tough, if only because it was part of the day's demands.

Take one illustrative example, the British Army major who, with ten of his men, blundered into Magbeni, the Sierra Leone village controlled by lunatics with guns late in September 2000. Had this been an EO operation, nobody would have gone near the place until they'd taken the trouble to find out who or what was there. This simple precaution is essential in any conflict environment in the Third World. American troops recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to echo the sentiment.

The consequences of the Magbeni catastrophe were serious. Apart from millions spent in getting a rescue effort off the ground, the operation that

followed caused the death of an SAS bombardier and the wounding of almost a dozen more British troops, two of them seriously. The British Army is not likely to make that kind of mistake again.

So, too, with relations with the people. From the president down, any kind of social interaction between EO and local folk had to be exemplary. If a man couldn't relate comfortably with Africans, an EO recruit was routinely warned on signing up, he had no place in the organization. And while there were examples of interracial strife elsewhere on the continent, and South Africans – as we are constantly reminded – are hardly paragons of racial virtue, EO would always stress that its people were required to be empathetic towards those with whom they had contact.

This was not a problem for the men who had been in elite units of the SADF. For them a man's race had never been an issue – even in the days when the severest racial strictures bedeviled life in South Africa. In any event, that country's Special Forces were always more than half-black. In fact, the elite, partly Angolan 32 Battalion was 80 percent African and the Ovambo 101 Battalion had only white officers and some white NCOs.

At the same time, while EO executives would quickly ingratiate themselves with a country's leadership, there wasn't all that much socializing between EO officers and the host country's military. That was in marked contrast to the cavorting that went on in Sierra Leone's bars once the newcomers discovered some of Freetown's wilder nightspots.

In the upper echelons of Angola's armed forces in contrast, "gifts" would feature prominently. There was always something on the plane out of South Africa for key generals. A new Range Rover and a $32,000 electric generator went to the three-star headquarters general that ran their show when I was there. Most times, such things were kept to practicalities.

Further down the ranks, life was informal, with the result that the people of both Luanda and Freetown soon embraced these newcomers. During the time I spent with Luitingh, the locals looked after us exceedingly well. Whenever the two of us drove around the city after dark – without an escort – we were never checked at roadblocks even though security controls in those days (as opposed to Nellis's term) were letter-of-the-law as far as the rest of the population was concerned.

1 "Mercenaries Fuel Next Round in Angolan Civil War": Al J. Venter, Jane's *International Defence Review*; March 1996

2 Duncan Rykaart was previously OC of 52 Commando of 5RR, and thereafter acting OC of 5RR after the death of Corrie Meerholz.

3 Though relocated to Conakry in Guinea because of the civil war in Liberia, Robertsfield retained its original name for ease of recognition by the international aviation community.

4 About when I went into Angola with EO the first time, the company was negotiating a contract with Mexico to send some of its men in to quell Chiapas unrest. The CIA apparently got wind of it and the project was shelved, if only because the American taxpayer would have ended paying for it in the form of monies received by Mexico as aid from the US. A scandal would undoubtedly have resulted had they gone through with it.

5 That still didn't prevent me from getting an AK shoved in my face and arrested for taking photos after I touched down with an EO contingent at Saurimo Airport. It took Blaauw and Rykaart half a day to extricate me from a situation that at one stage got ugly. In a prior confrontation between EO and the "Ninjas", there was a twenty-minute exchange of fire before the issue was settled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BOUNTY HUNT IN RHODESIA

Though called Zimbabwe today and – at the time of writing – ruled by a psychopath who has totally destroyed the country in which his people fought an eight-year war, Rhodesia was once a proud and well-ordered little territory that put much of the rest of Africa to shame. Unfortunately, that was during what we now term the "Cold War" and the rebel state tended to attract some unusual individuals to help with the struggle, quite a few of them American.

McGrady woke me after midnight. The American grunted softly and nodded in the direction of the river. "Gunther and the Greek are asleep," he said quietly.

"So much for those fuckers guarding our butts…"

From my sleeping bag tucked next to a couple of large boulders, the night appeared less oppressive after the rains. From dawn onwards it had been a tough slog. Much of the hike had taken us across difficult thorn and mopani country speckled by giant outcrops of granite, some as high as multi-storied buildings. *Gomos*, they called them up Mount Darwin way, and probably still do: it's a Shona word.

There'd been a few stops, usually to brush tsetse flies from our backs and catch a breather. But nothing long enough even for a brew: always tea, because you can smell coffee for miles in the African bush. When we found a temporary campsite we opened a few canteens and drank some of the water we'd taken earlier from one of the few streams we'd crossed. One of the guys tried to filter some of it through his bush hat and while the result tasted muddy, it had got rid of some of the grit.

Too risky to start a fire, McGrady ventured. I agreed, in part because of

the goats we'd heard a few miles back. In that kind of backwater, a single goat equates human presence. Also, we weren't quite sure how these people would view a quartet of strange whites spending time on their turf; we were all in camouflage and shouldered an assortment of weapons. News of strangers in remote areas travels fast, especially in the African bush, so we kept out of sight and never crossed open ground if we could help it.

Domestic animals might also signify a "gook" camp. McGrady had mentioned as much earlier, out of earshot of the other two because they were already on tenterhooks. We two should take extra care, he suggested. I couldn't argue, especially since these were unknown factors in a land that was being disputed both by the guerrillas and the government.



American 'Freebooter" Dave McGrady spent a couple of years hunting insurgents for bounty during the Rhodesian War. (Photo: Author)

Now that we'd moved in, McGrady was hoping for a kill or two of his own… if they didn't get us first…

The insurgents in that area, northwest of Wankie, were a tough, seasoned

bunch of fighters, we'd heard tell back at the Quill Club in Salisbury… today's Harare. This was the land of the Matabele, distant cousins of their belligerent Zulu forebears; the majority of rebels operational in that region were loyal to the portly Joshua Nkomo. Many, we knew, had been trained abroad, some in Iron Curtain countries. Also, we took it for granted that they'd have been issued with some pretty adequate hardware.

While the four of us were well-enough armed for any normal kind of contact – between us we had two FN-FAL rifles, McGrady's converted AR-15 and my own Mini-Ruger (the last two in .223 caliber) – we really weren't properly equipped as a hunting party in a war zone. Even with our clutch or two of grenades, we'd never have matched anything sophisticated like the guerrillas lugged. McGrady had read some of the intelligence reports that passed through his hands from time to time: all emphasized the sophistication of the weapons being lugged around by this guerrilla force that almost nobody held in high regard. Among hardware regularly brought back from bush forays were AKs in profusion, as well as Rods, RPG-7s and POM-Zs, never mind the usual batch of anti-personnel and TM-56 anti-tank mines. He'd been warned by some of the Rhodesian regulars that the guerrillas knew how to lay those mines as well.

The mines were always a consideration, which was why we moved as cautiously as we did. We also slept uneasily, because in doing his customary hourly rounds, McGrady discovered the Greek slumped fast asleep over his rifle on his two-hour watch on the first night out.

With McGrady just a dark shadow at my side – he laid *on* his sleeping bag rather than *in* it – I peered into the darkness in an effort to see what it was that had caused him to rouse me. It couldn't have been all that serious because my slumber had been pretty intermittent anyway.

I leaned over towards him: "You hear anything?"

"Negative," he whispered.

"Had a bunch of something come through… must have been wildebeest… moved on towards where *they* are," he said, pointing at a position perhaps 150 yards away; "…probably spooked when they smelt the Greek's aftershave… galloped off quickly. That's what got me on my elbows," he added.

McGrady wasn't enamored of the Greek. Within a day or so the sentiment was reciprocated and from then on the two hardly exchanged a word. The

European gangster didn’t like being told what to do, which was one of the reasons why the American felt he could have managed better without him.

Just then some heavy cloud moved in and covered what little moon was left over this stretch of Matabeleland. It would rain again, probably soon, McGrady had told me earlier. If it did, the people we were looking for wouldn’t find yesterday’s spoor. Trouble was, if they’d left tracks in the direction we were headed, we wouldn’t spot theirs either.

The first few days out in the wilds had been difficult. The immediate difference between the American and ourselves was that McGrady had his bush legs and it was all us city folk could do to keep pace. But then he’d been doing this kind of thing for a while. He’d been trying for months to get himself a kill, or as he phrased it, “a terr[1], two preferably, both dead.”

That kind of jargon was pretty specific in the bars around Salisbury. A dead gook could bring in Rhodesian$1,500 from the authorities, or at least that’s what the posters promulgated, only in less abrasive lingo. Moreover, this American wanted a piece of the action.

McGrady acknowledged that while it all sounded fine, it was a two-way street. “They” might get him first, he conceded, which was why he’d invited us along for the ride. And then, when things started going sour with the other two, he thought better of it.

“Bad mistake,” he would comment, usually late in the day. “Could have done better on my own…”

He was annoyed that the Greek didn’t know how to move silently through the bush. Worse, he couldn’t keep his trap shut, especially towards sunset when the bush went quiet. Or that Gunther – whom he called the German – demanded to fill his water bottles each time we crossed a stream.

Gunther wasn’t actually a German – just the name. He’d been born in South Africa and for a fitness freak who was supposed to have spent time with the Recces, he didn’t strike us as being among the sharpest of Special Forces honchos in anybody’s army. On the second night out, about half way through his watch, McGrady spotted him standing tall in the moonlight doing windmill stretching exercises to limber up. Eyes rolling, the American wondered out loud if the man had ever been anywhere near one of South Africa’s crack reconnaissance regiments…

Also, his constant need for water worried us. The man perspired like a

hog. We'd walk a mile and his entire uniform would be soaked; clearly, that wasn't normal. Whereas the rest of us could manage on between three and five water bottles a day, he needed 20. Only later did we learn it was a medical problem that had precluded him from taking part in long-range ops with the army. A couple of years after our little jaunt in the bush we heard that Gunther had died of a heart attack, which was unexpected because he was otherwise fit and strong.

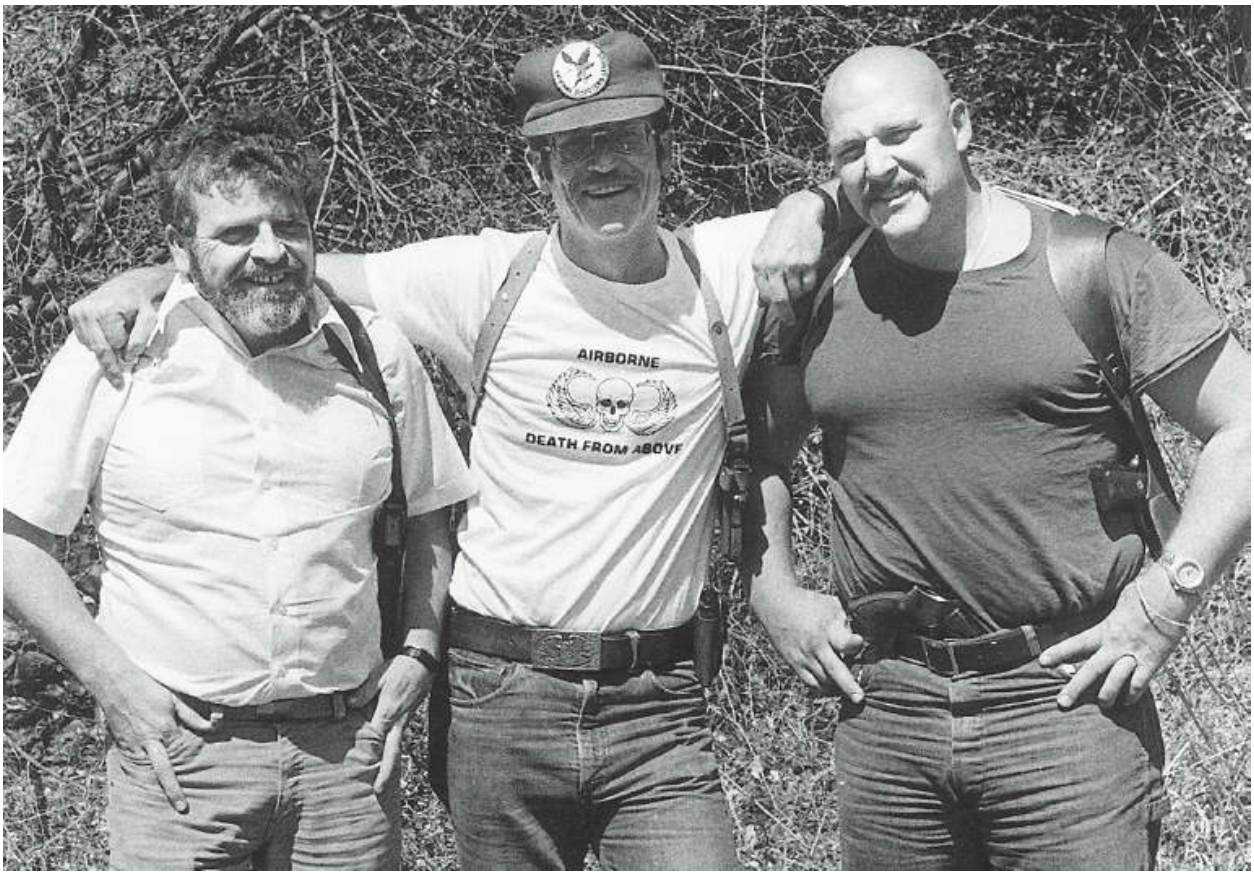
Those first few days were tough. Though it took time, we adapted quickly and were able to keep pace with McGrady from the second day on. Like the American, we soon became accustomed to this strange and sometimes curiously muted world where conflict had intruded like no other modern-day influence. To those involved, McGrady included, it was almost a game: men on the hunt, intent on destroying each other.

In another sense, the checkerboard had enveloped us all: an uncompromising game, as someone called it: "Them or Us."

Some, like Michigan native Dave McGrady, did it for a cause. Others were into it for the money. To these new-style Africa-bound bounty hunters, that could amount to a good deal of cash. Moreover, it was all tax-free.

Our first-night ambush position near the Gwaai River wasn't ideal. Rushing water from the adjacent stream tended to conceal any noise we made, but then, as McGrady pointed out, it would do the same for the enemy as well if they crept up on us.

While the position alongside the river wasn't too exposed, there were fresh tracks in the vicinity and these worried him. Earlier we'd crossed an even bigger waterway, the Shangani River, swollen now by six weeks of heavy rain into a torrent that defied crossing in anything but the improvised pontoon we'd used to get to the other side. This was a bulky and unwieldy device made of 55-gallon drums that barely floated properly; we had to punt it with a long pole.



Soldier of Fortune was always well represented in Rhodesia of old during the war years. Colonel Robert K Brown who founded the magazine is flanked by “Fat Ralph” Edens (left) and “Big John” Donovan, a former major and demolitions expert in the US Forces. Visitors to the country from America or Europe could freely enter the country with their firearms and there was no restriction on carrying. (Photo: Author)

A local Rhodesian rancher took us across the river and his four African employees had to push hard against the current.

“When you get back, fire three evenly-spaced shots and we’ll come and fetch you,” the rancher told us. “It’ll take me about 45 minutes to round up the crew so don’t be in too much of hurry,” were his parting words to us.

The rancher said nothing about what we should do if we were on the run, possibly with a squad of rebels at our heels. Because of crocs, swimming wasn’t an option, or shouldn’t have been, because I hadn’t yet totally rejected the option. No question they were around, because the rancher had almost lost one of his dogs a few days before we got there after it jumped into the water and swam across to join its master…

In the days that followed we saw a lot of tracks. Some reflected the linear

chevron design that distinguished members of the Zimbabwe Peoples' Republican Army (ZIPRA) from their Mozambique-orientated counterparts who owed allegiance to Robert Mugabe and called themselves ZANLA.

Occasionally, McGrady would lay his assault rifle on the ground as an improvised measuring stick to pick up the spoor after it had trailed off into different directions. This was another aspect of the game: nobody walked in a straight line any longer than they had to in this kind of counter-insurgency warfare.

We also noticed a few figure-eights left in the deep mud by recent visitors wearing Czech boots. They worried McGrady because the Czech-trained insurgents had already garnered a reputation for stealth and ruthlessness. The American estimated that because of the rains, none of the tracks were more than a day old. Our black tracker, who boasted the illustrious name of Montgomery, concurred.

Obviously, while we saw nobody in that vast Rhodesian bush, we weren't alone. On the face of it, the entire region looked abandoned, or possibly just sparsely inhabited because of the war. But there were people about and, as McGrady suggested when the Greek thought otherwise, that had to be expected on the fringe of Rhodesia's Lupani Tribal Trust Land. Whoever and wherever they were, he quietly declared, he hoped we'd find them before they spotted us. I liked that about the man: few things fazed him and in the bush, he took nothing for granted.

As the American ruminated after our little jaunt was over, just about wherever you go on the continent of Africa, "there'll always be a face somewhere, peeping out of the bush at you…"

The second night out, we'd taken up a position further towards the north. The sun had barely set before the drums started. Obviously emanating from one of the villages we'd circumvented, they were closer than we'd initially suspected. That accentuated our problem.

Gunther wanted to know if this was a warning to other villages that we were in the area. "We'll know the answer to that one if they attack," McGrady retorted.

Which meant that none of us slept easily that night.

There was another issue. We were all aware that the war had entered a new and more aggressive phase than before. Even cursory evidence of an army

presence in an area might have set the infiltrators on the run in the past. As hostilities progressed, things changed. By the time we arrived in this remote region north of the main highway between Bulawayo and the Zambian border post at Victoria Falls, those doing the hunting, we'd heard, were increasingly becoming the hunted.

Barely a week earlier, McGrady had lost one of his Rhodesian buddies in just such a counter-attack. It had come as surprise, if only because nobody believed that such a small guerrilla unit could be quite so assertive: there were only about six or eight of them. The man's unit had been following tracks, but the enemy they were after doubled back. They hit at sunset just as the four-man "stick" settled down for a night ambush.

The event was instructive and McGrady made the rest of us take note: we were no longer dealing with a bunch of amateurs, he averred.

"They're good, these guys… bush-savvy… this is their land and they're familiar with just about all of it.

"They get the locals to be their eyes and ears, even if it needs a little coercion from the business end of a barrel. If that happens, we're going to have no option but to reckon with them." For once there were no questions from either Gunther or the Greek.

With these thoughts in mind, an hour or two in the rain-sodden bush, perched as we were beside a fast-flowing river, sometimes seemed to last half the night. There were two watch spells for each of the two groups: McGrady and I for the first three hours of darkness, followed by the other two and then us again. The routine would be repeated until dawn and the process would be reversed the following night. After we'd discovered that the Greek had dozed off over his rifle, none of us got any real rest.

I asked the American what we needed to do to remedy a situation that could become critical. His reply was unequivocal: "Shoot the bastard the next time it happens," which was what he'd already told the man the first time he'd kicked him awake while he was supposed to be on watch.

Nor did the presence of goats help; they added to our edginess. In the dark it was easy to mistake their deep, throaty grunts for a human cough, or possibly somebody clearing his throat. And when that happens, you sit up, move your finger across the slide towards the trigger and try to peer through the fog of night to see what's up.

That and the disconcerting screams of a baboon troop in the bush after

dark. Were they fighting or was it a leopard on the hunt? With so many of these big cats about, one would have thought the primates would have preferred not to broadcast their presence…

It seemed an eternity before they would move on.

Or the mysterious wild creature that would wake us with a start every hour or so, when it would jump into the water within yards of where we were stretched out, usually accompanied by a loud splash. It was probably a water monitor and the noise would startle those who weren't already lying there with their eyes open. Then it takes a minute or two for the muscles to slacken again. Meanwhile, the mind remains taut.

"As tight as a guitar string," was how McGrady succinctly phrased it.

By first light, we were up. By then, Gunther had already crammed his soggy sleeping bag into his pack and shouldered it. He'd hang about and wait for us to get ready. Almost every morning we were out, he'd complain that the weight of his pack had doubled, which was when one of us would remind him about the rain. McGrady would shrug and mutter something us putting our lives at risk with this man.

Minutes later on that third morning we were on our way towards the improvised bridge we'd crossed the night before, a narrow tree trunk that hovered precariously above the current. One by one, with the others covering, we headed across. On the other side, McGrady took point with the tracker following. I followed up in the rear because I needed photographs.

Once on the far bank, the American pointed to a fresh set of boot prints in the dirt, hours old. Montgomery slowly lifted his head and, with the kind of gesture that comes with experience, sniffed the wind. "Nothing", he said quietly. Then he turned to the Greek and quipped in his quaint, fractured English: "Dey long time gone…"

Since there wasn't a whiff of those who'd come in the night, we had something more with which to occupy our thoughts as we trudged through a succession of broken forest country that stretched back all the way to the Zambezi. For some reason – clearly inexplicable but of immense consequence to – our unknown "visitors" had wavered before taking those final few steps across the water. Probably a gook reconnaissance team, McGrady ventured.

What had stopped them? We pondered the matter when we halted briefly

for a break. There were no conclusions though the incident sharpened everybody's senses. By now we were moving even more cautiously than before, each one of us intent on putting more distance between them and us in the tall elephant grass that dominated large open areas adjacent to some of the clearings. We didn't exactly expect to be ambushed – that was to have been our job – but there wasn't a man among us whose safety hadn't been flicked off in anticipation of what we believed to be inevitable.

After being on the road a few hours, the rest of the trail seemed clear. Several times it meandered towards clusters of tall rocks that could be seen at a distance poking above the flat terrain. Even to this unseasoned eye, these landmarks were distinctive.

About noon that day, McGrady pointed out a rocky outcrop ahead, much bigger than the rest. It was used as a collection point by groups of insurgents who entered from Zambia, he'd been told. He underscored its position on the map that he'd kept in a waterproof holder tucked into his webbing.

For the rest of that day's patrol we kept well within the tree line. If there was any spotting to be done, we'd do it from the kind of cover that our Rhodesian Army friends embraced. Then, to be doubly sure, McGrady decided that we should occasionally double back on our tracks. We did that several times, but found nothing.

About an hour before sunset on that third day, we halted briefly for the customary snack. The march had been difficult and the heat had slowed our pace, but there was no stopping, not this deep into a totally unfamiliar terrain.

Dinner was simple: tea and kudu biltong [2], bought before we left civilization from the small fresh-produce store behind one of the big hotels in Bulawayo. It was enough to sustain a man for a ten-hour march.

"It's the only food I carry, light and full of protein and best of all, it never spoils in the sun," said McGrady.

South Africa, and home, I felt, were suddenly rather distant, even though it had taken us only nine hours by road to reach the place which was to be our stamping ground for the next eight or 10 days.

McGrady, originally from America's Midwest and now at this stage, searching for terrorist kills in Rhodesia, had one lasting regret: that he'd never fought in his country's most recent war in Vietnam. He knew it would have provided the training and experience to make things easier in Africa.

When we'd discussed it earlier, he mentioned that he would have liked to have done basics and possibly then gone on to Special Forces training, if they'd accept him, of course.

"It'd have to be one of those units… I'm too much of a loner to put up with this grunt-bonding crap. Give me the essentials and leave me to my own devices." It was his eyes, he explained. Bad eyesight had prevented him from being drafted to South East Asia.

"The war was winding down, so the draft board was rejecting guys like me… but it hasn't held me back from doing my thing here…", which was when he gave one of his rare chuckles. He'd discuss the matter with the same kind of detachment he might have used when ordering a beer.

This young American had no illusions about the kind of work in which he'd been involved in Africa. Or that his limited experience of a sophisticated guerrilla struggle might bring difficulties. In the brief time he'd spent in this particular conflict, he'd developed an appreciation for the wilderness that a year ago might have been as alien to him as the jungles of Brazil and which sometimes takes others decades to assimilate.

At first glance, McGrady appeared to slot perfectly into his newfound job. He had brought his own stock of firearms and boxed ammunition to Africa and having done his homework – he was an avid reader – he'd arrived reasonably well prepared. The work was tough, but this young man, whom I'd never known not to sport a beard, was in superb physical shape. That, a solid sense of bush-craft, coupled to a level of stamina rarely found outside the ranks of the Green Berets, made for dedication. Certainly, his physical ability and fairly recently acquired bush-craft put the other three of us to shame.

From the start, we were aware that McGrady wasn't prone to that common failing to which most Americans are susceptible: underestimating the enemy.

"I know what I'm up against. I also know what *they* can do as well as *what* they've done. So, before I get involved in a scrap, I scratch everywhere for background research on the particular brand of gook active in the area in which I'm going to operate. And in the broader picture, I like to make sure I'm supporting the right cause… can't do something you don't believe in.

"Then I get to try to understand their culture, which is essential if you're going to avoid misunderstandings which are most-times unnecessary. And when I'm on ops in the bush, I kind of go into what I like to call my sixth,

ultra-alert sense… keeps me alive and well."

He had his own personal philosophy about motivation… why he was there. It went something like this:

"Both the ZANLA and ZIPRA terrorist groups are pretty brutal when it comes to killing anybody who might be opposed to what they stand for. Here I emphasis the 'might' part of the equation because you can die very easily for what they *think* you might be thinking, not what you really are. It's the same kind of totalitarianism that we've seen in Cambodia and parts of Lebanon: the 'all or nothing syndrome'.

"If you're not for them, it is assumed you must be against them… it's all black and white and not a single grey…" He'd long ago learned that the insurgents, on average, killed a dozen or more blacks to every white. He was opposed to that kind of anarchy.

"I'm not in Rhodesia to keep the power in the hands of the white minority. I just didn't want a despot taking over and making life miserable for everyone," he went on.

"Those bastards will take a village chief from his hut, cut off his ears, his lips and sometimes other parts and force his wife and other family members to eat those body parts. Then they'll murder him and often deal with the rest of the family in the same way, simply because they're family.

"We've had some of the white people captured who have been similarly brutalized, women were raped, babies hung from trees and bayoneted. Not the kind of people that I'd ultimately like to see running any country…"

Once in the wilderness, Dave McGrady missed little of what went on while he was in the bush. He was prone to quoting what one of his Selous Scout buddies once told him: "Develop a knack for looking beyond the obvious… try to spot anything thing out of place… look for the unusual…"

Also, in this kind of work, he knew that if you were slack, and didn't pay attention to the small things that mattered and do the necessary when required, you ended up dead. It was as simple as that, he'd say, because conflict is unforgiving.

By his own admission, much of what this American had learned in the African bush in the interim came from the process of trial and error. He conceded to some serious blunders that, under different circumstances, might have cost him his life.

“But I learnt and had to do a lot of it on my own because there’s usually only a modicum of input from others, mostly from some of the guys who have been doing a similar kind of work.” Most sobering, he acknowledged, was that he was strictly a bounty hunter and could count on no military support from the Rhodesian authorities.

“That means, whatever happens, I’m on my own. I can’t call in for any support. No air strikes if I run into the enemy… no RLI, no Fire Force… even if I’m completely surrounded. Nothing! Obviously once I’ve made contact and I’m able to put the word out, they’ll come running. But how do you do that without radio comms?

“And considering all that, I don’t exactly think I’ve fallen down on the job. Some of the folks out here believe that I’ve been into this business a lot longer then I have and, judging by results, I reckon I’ve been pretty damn successful.” On that point McGrady refused to elaborate, except to say that in previous months he’d been active in several areas in Matabeleland that had been declared “hot” by defense planners back in Salisbury.

In a sense, this American had become a thoroughly competent military man. He was a perfectionist who relied solely on both instinct and his natural skills to stay alive. Had he remained on in the United States and perhaps turned his talents to crime – something he admits crossed his mind on occasion – he would almost certainly have given local law enforcement agencies grief.

What was also different about McGrady was that while he remained a combatant in Rhodesia, he was determined not to add his name to the long list of mercenaries and other adventurers who had perished there.

For some time after first arriving in the country, Dave McGrady had worked for the Rhodesian Department of Health.

He was given the job of riding shotgun with his 30-round AR-15 carbine and a Colt Commander .45 ACP in a shoulder holster. He’d sport a Gerber Mark II survival knife, usually suspended from his webbing. Later he acquired a clutch of grenades that he liked to keep strung within easy reach on his Vietnam-era nylon webbing.

“Reckon I’ll save one of them for the terr who rolls me over to see if I’m dead or not.” An unlikely situation, because McGrady always carried magazines loaded with nearly 900 rounds, enough to keep a minor gook army

at bay, he opined.

While working Health, it was his job to offer protection to some of the department's units required to enter Tribal Trust Lands in specific areas. It was the only way they could work, which was essential if tabs were kept on immunizations, outbreaks of cholera and even an anthrax epidemic at one stage in cattle, which also ended up affecting some humans.

"It was actually pretty interesting stuff," was one of his asides. "But we didn't see much action. The "gooks" were there all right. I expected them to react, but there wasn't a helluva lot of risk." At that stage, he explained, the insurgents preferred soft targets; his arsenal probably intimidated them, he would joke.



On one of Dave McGrady's bounty hunts in the north-west of the country, the author – with two friends – were invited to go along "on the chase". They found out only years later that the four of them were being hunted by a crack 20-strong guerrilla unit that was following their tracks. They were able to cross a river to safety about an hour before they could have been attacked. (Photo: Author)

Landmines were another matter. The terrs would mark areas where they'd planted them with empty fertilizer or grain bags, sometimes with rocks on them. Or they'd use a tree branch broken in a certain way. It was all done to a specific plan so that their comrades would know there were mines in a specific area.

"But then we used protected vehicles… that minimized the danger, but not

every single time because there were still many of the troops killed in these blasts… and some support people doing the same work in which I was involved."

By the time the four of us got to the area in which McGrady had been operating, things had changed fairly drastically. The war had suddenly become more intense and insurgents active in the area were engaged in what they liked to term "Mao's Second Phase."

It was all rather fanciful to these simple tribal people among whom the guerrillas operated. Certainly, they could make so sense of what the newcomers from Zambia or Mozambique liked to call "Universal Socialism": they could just easily have talked about the man on the moon and it might have had the same effect. The locals would be gathered together for an indaba and then be required to listen patiently while the unit's political commissar harangued, sometimes for hours, about the nature of the colonial struggle in which they involved.

It would go a lot better when the guerrillas would tell the people that they needed to aggressively tackle the security forces… kill as many as they could and finally, drive all these enemies out of Rhodesia.

McGrady's views were forthright: "Though the tribal people hereabouts might not grasp any of this gobbledygook, they know damn well that if they don't help these insurgent groups, feed them, let them use their women and use their children, out in the bush with their cattle and warn them of the presence of security forces, then they'd suffer. Or their families would.

"Essentially it's coercion. And when I'm involved in the bush, it's me and them… man to man. I go after these fuckers… I hunt them, chase them down. And when things don't work out quite the way I reckon they should, they sometimes end up chasing me around the bush," was one of his comments.

In McGrady's distinctive manner, he regarded this kind of activity as more of a game than the intensely serious business of war.

David G. McGrady, an American private citizen with no military background, arrived in Africa by way of *Soldier of Fortune*, the Colorado-based magazine that catered to what it liked to term "Modern-Day Adventurers." These were mostly former vets, many of whom had done a tour or three in Vietnam and who sought action, legal or otherwise, under foreign flags.

There were also quite a few who wanted something different, as one of them explained, “just for the hell of it,” which was how some enthusiasts found their way into strange places like Beirut, Afghanistan, El Salvador and obviously, Rhodesia.

SOF, as we used to call Bob Brown’s magazine, published several features on the Rhodesian War. About then McGrady, always the iconoclast, got hold of a copy of one of my early books on guerrilla warfare in Africa. Titled *The Zambezi Salient*[3], it covered a lot of Rhodesian ground, as well as some of Portugal’s military campaigns, a few of which appear between these covers.

He obviously liked what he read, and through my publishers, got my address and dropped me a line. His first question was: are there any military opportunities in which I can get involved in southern Africa?

I replied that there were plenty, but that he’d not only have to get himself across to the “Dark Continent”, but he’d have to consider carefully whether this was something he’d really like to get involved in, especially since he had no military background. I suggested that he make sure that he arrived reasonably well equipped: “You’re going to need your own kit and the kind of heavy stuff that might be useful,” was my initial suggestion.

Perhaps two months later a youthful Dave McGrady arrived in Johannesburg where he met three other American adventurers, all with solid military experience under their belts: Drenkowski, Cunningham and Bolen.

Dana Drenkowski was a USAF pilot who’d flown more than 200 combat missions over South East Asia in Phantom F-4s and B-52 bombers and had then gone on to work briefly for Libya’s Colonel Gadaffi[4]. Tom Cunningham and Jim Bolen in contrast, were both former members of US Army Special Forces units. Jim was a member of a CIA/SOG team in Vietnam and Tom had left behind a leg in South East Asia following a contact with the Cong.

With this bunch on my doorstep I had to do something to get them going. Since I was working for a local magazine at the time and spotted the opportunity of something possibly happening to these guys in Rhodesia, I suggested to Jack Shepherd-Smith, my editor, that we perhaps had the makings of a story. Which was when I was given one of the company cars and McGrady and I set out for Salisbury. The others had already gone ahead.

Once in Salisbury, McGrady tried to join the army and get himself posted to the Rhodesian Light Infantry. He was dissuaded from doing so by the

recruiting officer who suggested, in part, that because the American was a married man with children and had neither combat skills nor a military background, he might possibly be better suited to rural protection work instead. Which was when he was pointed in the direction of the Rhodesian Health Department.

It wasn't long therefore before McGrady, by now a blooded American mercenary and bounty hunter, became typical of some of the freelancers we might encounter in Rhodesia's bush war during the 1980s. Though never attached to any regular "Rhodie" force, he saw enough action in the former rebel state to eventually qualify for a job with Sa'ad Haddad's South Lebanon Army.

Almost nothing goes to plan in wartime and the Rhodesian War was no different. It was the same with our patrol on the search for insurgents in the country's remote northwest.

By the third day the hunt had lost its allure. In the words of the Greek: "It has become a totally fucking bore… I came here to kill and all we do is walk through this shitty bush country. We find nothing and then we walk some more."

The rain poured down, often in buckets, and that didn't help either. In fact, there were times when it never seemed to stop. We'd trudge a while, always moving silently along the bush trail, stopping occasionally to rest, and McGrady would compare compass bearings with the map. Then we'd take off again and a few hours later, the routine would be repeated. It was tedious, but that's how these things happen in this kind of irregular conflict.

Several times we crossed human tracks that might be fresh if the rain stopped long enough, but of their owners, nothing!

We'd brought enough food to keep us happy for about a week. Gunther had suggested prior to setting out that we might possibly shoot something for the pot but the American vetoed him. "Fire off a shot in this bush and they'll pick it up five miles away… maybe more… then they'll end up tracking us," was his comment. When the mood took him, McGrady could be acerbic and pretty much to the point.

To which he added: "I'd imagine that by now, they already know we're in the area. Perhaps not our exact location, so let's just keep it that way." He didn't hang around to debate the issue.

Our single biggest problem from the first day out one was keeping

Gunther and the Greek from continually chatting while on the march. McGrady's demands were basic and the need for silence in that remote bush country where sound can travel for miles was number one. It would be that way throughout the march – no talking – especially towards nightfall when nobody was certain who or what was out there. He wasn't asking much, but these two had great difficulty in complying: they'd always be nattering among themselves and it was usually a gripe.

On the third day, when the Greek decided at sundown to cut down some branches to make a fire, which was not only absurd – but under the circumstances risky – his clumsy efforts caused the American to lose his cool. It was the only time I was to see him angry. Grabbing the cocky little Greek by the throat, he told him that if he continued with this kind of bullshit, he'd cut him loose and leave him to the deal with the enemy on his own. There was no argument and, to be fair, things did quieten down a lot afterwards.

From then on, McGrady, Montgomery our guide and I slept a good few hundred yards downwind from the others. We'd prepare our own meals and stand our own watches. If there were going to be problems because those two couldn't keep their mouths shut, said the American, they could handle it for themselves.



Dave McGrady and guerrilla kill in the Rhodesian War. (Photo: Author)

He phrased it in typical McGrady fashion: “Then we slip away and pretend they never existed. I don’t think they’d be missed…”

By the fifth or sixth day we knew it was over. We were getting nowhere. Nor was there any prospect of a decent ambush, not once the locals had become aware that we were around. That and the fact that we’d spotted gook tracks in our area… there was no doubt that by then they’d seen ours.

Gunther and the Greek couldn’t bring themselves to slot into a fairly tough regimen, and this finally put the crunch on it. That, together with Gunther’s constant demands that he fill his water bottles while rain pounded down around us. We’d head for the pontoon and the farmhouse the next morning, McGrady told the other two before dark. He came back to our position with the news that they seemed quite happy with the change of plan and it pleased him.

Before noon the following day, within sight of the old farmhouse across the river, we’d fired off three shots. Little more than an hour later I was under the shower and the old man’s cook was preparing lunch. Gunther and the Greek were nursing their blisters and wondering aloud what was on the

menu.

A year later was I to get the full story of our little escapade. Apparently we were lucky to have “got out of there without having been attacked,” as one Rhodesian officer phrased it when he collared me afterwards in Johannesburg. In his view, we’d been on a military operation that was not only stupid but was hare-brained. We were saved only by the fact that the insurgent group in the area was equally dumbstruck… the gook commander simply didn’t know what to do about us.

The Rhodesian who passed on this news had spent some time at Wankie with the man who temporarily commanded the regional Joint Operations Centre, or more commonly, the JOC. He’d admitted that the army was aware of what we’d been trying to do: they’d actually intercepted a message from the insurgent leader to one of his squads that was active in the Tribal Trust Land after we’d gone in.

In brief, they mentioned to their superiors in Zambia the presence of “four members of the security forces, two of them bearded, together with a black scout.”

The gist of that radio report was that the guerrilla group initially believed we’d been sent in by the Rhodesian Army to lure them into an ambush. They believed that there were possibly other Rhodesian Security Forces in the area waiting to strike; feints and counter-feints took place often enough in this conflict, for such is the essence of this kind of counter-insurgency in Africa.

They were right about the ambush, which had been our original intention. Fortunately for us, they were wrong about everything else.

As I was told during that chance meeting a year later, on the sixth morning of our patrol – the same day that we decided to call it quits – the ZANLA squad that had sent the original message received an order from Lusaka to take us out. In fact, said the officer who confided these details, they were perhaps a half-a-mile behind us by the time we boarded the pontoon. They were on their way to get us, a squad of about 20, every man-jack well trained and armed with more weapons than we would have been able to shake a stick at.

That wasn’t the end of the story. The head of Rhodesian forces in that specific area – headquartered in Victoria Falls, not being aware that we’d crossed the river and were comparatively safe, went on to send a platoon of

troops – all members of the Rhodesian African Rifles – into the Lupani Tribal Trust area in a bid to search for us. There was also talk of using spotter planes to make contact, though I'm not sure how successful that might have been in the thick bush country of the northwest.

The RAR troops arrived in the area in two trucks, which were promptly ambushed on the way in. Twice! Only after a Fire Force call-out was pressure finally lifted, but by then there had been casualties on both sides.

It was as a result of that little escapade that I was banned from entering Rhodesia ever again, though I was to get over that little hurdle as well a year later.

As Dave McGrady will tell you today, more than a quarter century after leaving southern Africa, things were reasonably relaxed in Rhodesia in the early days of the war. For much of the duration of hostilities, nobody gave the guerrillas a cat's chance of winning anything, never mind taking over the country.

Also, he was glad that hadn't joined the Rhodesian Army. Towards the end of the war, the desertion rate among Americans was something like 50 percent.

"Initially, I knew that I could get a job guarding someone's ranch or farm from attack. I did a few a jobs, but nothing much, probably because most farmers were just not prepared to pay a few hundred bucks a month even though I was quite happy to split whatever bounty I made with them. Most were broke themselves… the war.

"All I really wanted was an opportunity to help fight terrorism. I knew, once I'd made contact, possibly registered a few kills and so on, that the word would get out that farms in that area were no longer easy targets. I believed it might deter future attacks," was one of the comments he made about that period. It was a naïve approach, but that's been the way that McGrady has always rationalized.

In any event, nobody took him up on his offer, which was why he drifted into the Ministry of Health.

The last quarter of 1977 saw McGrady volunteering to look after the vast open land of several ranchers closer towards Bulawayo, a region that had seen a considerable escalation of terrorist activity. Some of these ranches had been abandoned, others temporarily vacated and quite few stayed unoccupied

for many years after the war ended. For long stretches McGrady was the only white – with several hundred African laborers – in an area of roughly 200,000 acres.

A letter he wrote at that stage read: “For the past month I’ve been doing farm security work on a ranch 60 clicks north of B (Bulawayo). Plenty of terrs. Same ‘ole problem though; no can find, and believe me, I’ve been out looking. Been laying night ambushes on known terr paths leading from the TTL [Tribal Trust Land] and also doing bush patrols during the day. So far no luck…”

Insurgents there certainly were, only McGrady never found any – not then, anyway – probably because he’d been working on his own. When he set up his one-man night ambushes, he had no one to help him share the load.

Another letter followed: “A few days ago our neighbor’s African boss boy’s pick-up truck was ambushed by three terrs. Armed with AKs, they fired on the truck, stopping it. They then dragged the black guy out, before setting it on fire to spite the rancher. The fuckers made off into the bush, though the good news is that they didn’t kill the driver. The night before they burned down this same guy’s hut and rifle-butted his brothers to put the fear of God into them… he told me that as many as 30 terrs will be crossing the Shangani River soon to attack the ranches. So I’m expecting them at any time.”

While McGrady went about his business on the ranches, the drama of war continued to unfold on an almost daily basis, some of it in the vicinity of the ranch.

A subsequent letter reported: “Last week a ranch and an Internal Affairs ‘Keep’ were attacked on separate nights[5]. Also had another ambush in the Wankie Game Park on a South African family’s car. You probably read about that one in the papers.

“Then two nights ago I heard a heavy explosion while sitting in the house… next day found out it was an Army vehicle that’d hit a TM-46 landmine; one soldier killed, two wounded pretty badly… these attacks took place just a short distance from where I’m based at present.”

It was that incident that prompted McGrady to provide protection for the ranchers in Matabeleland. Soon afterwards, I wrote him and enquired whether Gunther, the Greek and I could join in on one of his patrols. The rancher with whom he’d been staying had been ambushed in a dry riverbed

not far from the house. There were eight or nine guerrillas who fired on the farmer and his son while they'd been driving in their Land Rover.

"The old man was shot in the arm and back. His son was hit in the head, but luckily it was only a scalp wound. He ended up concussed. The attackers also fired an RPG but it missed.

"While the Land Rover was still rolling forward the old man fell out. As he was lying in the sand a terrorist came up to within three or four yards of him and started firing away with his AK… full auto. Shows how well these fuckers shoot… the terr missed the old guy every time. Instead, he was splattered with sand thrown up by bullets landing all around him."

At that moment, according to McGrady, the farmer managed to unholster his .22 cal. pistol and shot his attacker in the stomach. "The gook buckled over and then took off with the rest of his gang… The next day, the rancher and his son returned with a BSAP [British South Africa Police] stick, followed a blood trail and found the terr. He was dead, been finished off by his comrades. The rancher proudly showed McGrady the terr's cap insignia that he'd claimed as a souvenir.

To McGrady, that incident was part of a war that was becoming increasingly brutal. It was his contention that hostilities had devolved into a no-holds-barred affair and that too much of it, on the part of the Rhodesian Security Forces, was being fought "by the book."

"But not the enemy," he wrote in one of his letters. "They were pretty damn ruthless… stopped at nothing to achieve their aims… savage brutality is only a small part of it." And that, he added, was probably why he was still in Rhodesia, still looking for what he liked to call "gooks".

Nobody was under any illusions of what was expected of Dave McGrady while he remained in Rhodesia.

Danger apart, the average bounty hunter needed to be as good as, or superior to, those he was after, coupled with a healthy dollop of guile and luck. It was axiomatic that he needed to be superbly fit. In the bush, it was his legs that would do most of the work and, when the time came, they would also get him out of trouble. At his peak, Dave McGrady was one of the few infantrymen that I knew of who could stay on the trot behind a tracker for four or five hours running.

As he commented, it could be an extremely tough regimen because

everybody was aware that the average insurgent was also in superb physical shape. Also, he could survive on very little while out in the bush, sleep rough for months at a time, survive on his own in this primitive land and call on the locals when there was need to. And when targeted, he would often enough outlive wounds that would kill the average white man.

One member of Colonel Ron Reid-Daly's Selous Scouts – who was doing a little freelance bounty hunting – was caught on his own in a forward position by a squad of about a dozen insurgents. In the end, he had to spend more than a day dodging them. It was only because he was in such fine physical shape himself that he was eventually able to elude them and get away.

The Scouts apparently got paid extra for this kind of effort, which usually took place while they were on leave. It pissed off some of the other units who weren't offered the option. Brian Robinson, the penultimate commanding colonel of the Rhodesian SAS, got himself kicked out of the office of General Peter Walls when he protested. It was none of his business what the Scouts did when they were back home – or where they did it – the irate Supremo peremptorily informed him, Brian told me many years later.

While McGrady enjoyed no tactical support from the authorities, he did enjoy a small measure of input from local security forces. As he explained, if he were to enter an area that had been "frozen" without disclosing his intentions to the right people, both sides could target him. Also, apart from possibly being killed by the Rhodesian Security Forces, he could just as easily end up getting Rhodesian soldiers in his sights.

Which begs the question: How did the Rhodesians regard the majority of bounty hunters?

To most, McGrady concedes, "we were superfluous. We might have been necessary under some circumstances, but generally, we were regarded as more of a hindrance than help. Too many of them regarded us as a bunch of misfits, and obviously they were partly right… there were some mercs that were so way out that they simply didn't fit the bill."

From my own observations, there were also precious few McGradys, because only a tiny handful matched up to the kind of demands that Dave took in his stride.

The American had the last word. "Let's not underestimate what this job entailed. It was hard. Also, it could be totally unforgiving. One mistake and

you were a dead man." Which was probably why the average American who arrived in Rhodesia intent on making his fortune, lasted only three months, he added.

Some held on a bit longer, but then disillusion would set in and they'd go on home.

Later, following his stint with the South Lebanon Army in the Levant, McGrady spent a while in Nicaragua.

1 During the Rhodesian War, the colloquial term for guerrilla or insurgent fighter was "terr", an abbreviation for the word terrorist.

2 Jerky made from the African kudu, after the eland, the second largest antelope on the continent

3 *The Zambezi Salient*: Al J. Venter, Robert Hale, UK, 1974.

4 *War Dog: Fighting Other Peoples Wars*, Al J. Venter, Casemate Publishers, US and UK 2006

5 Government-controlled "Protected Village" or strongpoint, similar to the *Aldeamentos* system in Portugal's wars in Africa.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PROFILE OF A MERCENARY: AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL GREG LOVETT

Gregory Lovett is the original camera-shy pro. He doesn't like the media and he's not afraid to tell you so… if you can find him.

I'd gone from Michigan all the way to Prairie Grove, a small town in northwest Arkansas, to interview him. Though I'd made contact with the local chief of police – his former boss – as well as half-a-dozen others who knew where he hung out, the same message came back each time: "He don't like to talk to writers."

Still, I'd come that far, and I persisted. Eventually I managed to track down a phone number, but by then I was in New Orleans. When we eventually did speak, this tough, wary fighter – with years of police and, more recently, war work in Iraq behind him – agreed to fly to Louisiana where we were able to spend a good few hours together and, admittedly, there was as much talk as there was beer…

In Greg Lovett I discovered a man whose mind could best be described as a series of locked cupboards, guarded by the cherubs of self-discipline. Someone in Arkansas had suggested that he was the original no-nonsense achiever.

His reticence, he told me, was because he'd just arrived from Baghdad, where he'd worked first with a K-9 Squad, and then in VIP protection against suicide bombers as well as like-minded religious zealots, and was due to ship out again in a week. Before that, he had been in Kosovo, operating with about 150 others in a small town just beyond Pristina.

We were able to exchange more "no bullshit" notes on the Internet once

he’d reached the Iraqi capital, and since he is a minimalist, he wasn’t effusive about anything, either in the Middle East or chasing drug barons back home.

There were other reasons for Greg Lovett’s reluctance to talk about what he regarded as little more than a series of historical recollections. He had spent much of his professional life in law enforcement working undercover. Based in a remote part of the country – even though Prairie Grove is only 20 miles or so from Bentonville, the global headquarters of Walmart – he’d had his dust-ups while working with a variety of federal agencies, including the FBI and DEA, as well as some multi-jurisdictional task forces involved with serious crimes. Some of these had ended with shootings.



Greg Lovett on assignment with a private military company in Afghanistan early 2014. (Photo: Greg Lovett)

But throughout, he’d achieved results and had made his share of collars. He also said something about people out there who didn’t forget. He’d always walked a pretty thin line, he reckoned, but he’d done what was

necessary, and to his mind the world was a better place for it.

On the other hand, Lovett believes he's lucky to still be alive.

He was shot in the face by a twelve-year-old named Michael Nicholls, who picked Lovett for target practice with his 20-gauge-pump shotgun. Before it was over, he was hit four more times. The youngster had been playing hooky, and when Lovett went out to look for him, young Nicholls laid an ambush.

Greg Lovett was 22 years old when he joined the force. Until then he'd worked mainly for his brother-in-law in a fabrication company and slogged his way through school as a shop student.

Looking back, he calls his upbringing "the school of knocks." Even though his father was a car salesman and they enjoyed their small town existence in rural Arkansas, money was tight. A friend from childhood first interested Lovett in law enforcement. Pat Scaggs had joined the force a few years before and, though he was a bit older, Lovett followed him as an example. Also, the film *Serpico* had left its mark.

It was the first cop movie that he felt told it like it really was. "They left out none of the things that mattered… the language… the police work, the lies, deceit, and the way those cops went about doing their thing. Also, it was real life, since Serpico had been betrayed while actually working for the New York Police Department.

"It had a pretty clear message, and looking back, it affected me in a peculiar way, so much so that I felt I could identify with those cops."

Interestingly, after years of active police duty and receiving several awards himself, he was invited to the TOP COP Awards Banquet in Washington DC. Guest speaker was none other than Frank Serpico.

That night, he told me, "I was afforded the once-in-a-life time chance to talk with him and I wasn't disappointed. I've never told anyone the things we spoke of because I think there are very few people in the world who would understand or care."

By the time I got talking to Greg again, preparing his profile for this book, Greg was already into his fifties. He'd married again – a lovely lady by the name of Nickii – and had added Afghanistan to his checklist list of "private military" operations.

How does being a police officer tie in with years of mercenary work in Kosovo Iraq and Afghanistan? Fate, Greg reckons, seemed to have its hand in just about every turn in his life.

“One of the biggest twists of fate occurred in May 2000. I’d been seven years of working undercover, my hair down to my ass, running with every drug dealer and low life there was and living a ridiculous kind of double-life style. To this day there are people who cannot distinguish between my work life and the one I led when I was home.

“But the chief decided I had been in the spot light enough and gave me a low key, kind of out-of-the-way assignment. Or so he thought. I went from long hair, earring and beard to short hair, pressed uniform pants in 24 hours… I was assigned as a School Resource Officer. The chief thought my knowledge of drugs would be very useful in the schools and teach the drug education programs to the students, teacher and civic groups.

“Things went smoothly for a long time until a student hell-bent on killing the junior high principal was on his way back to classes with a loaded shotgun and 25 rounds of ammunition. At the time I intercepted him across the street from the school in a hay field, every student was in the gym for a school program. Had fate not put me in front of him I hate to think what might have happened…

“But enough of that for now; Al Venter wrote it all up in his book *Cops: Cheating Death* and even if I say so myself, it’s a pretty good read.

“When confronted the student opened fire on me. The first blast from the shotgun hit me in the face. I should have been killed or at least blinded, but I wasn’t. The aftermath was that both the student and I were wounded: badly wounded, I still manage to get a shot in to prevent that youngster from advancing on the school.”

“Then fate took another twist. Just days after the last court hearing my wife asked for a divorce… it seems she’d had enough.

The next thing I knew, my few remaining personal items were in storage and I was on my way to Kosovo in the Balkans. A few months later I was in Iraq at the start of the war. Forty months or so after that, while talking to my son on the phone, he asked me whether I was ever coming home again?”



The detritus of war, some of it dating back decades, is still find in numerous locations in Iraq. This tank bears the scars of an air attack by Coalition Forces. (Photo: Greg Lovett)

By 2010, after more undercover work in the States, Greg was back in the Middle East.

“This time I was doing counter-intelligence work for an American company out there and our mission was gathering information from the locals, be it Ali the shit truck driver or an Iraqi general with a dubious agenda.

“To the outsider, our screening process, surface-wise, seemed mundane and pointless, but there was method to the madness because someone somewhere had put some serious thought into our little operation. Also, it says a lot that this screening process is done in most Near East countries.”

During his overseas postings, Greg had his share of experiences, some of which he never spoke about afterwards. But, he reckoned, one of the scariest things he ever saw took place in Iraq during the summer of 2010.

It was so quiet and subtle that unless a person was watching and knew what was going on, it never would have been noticed, he recalled. And, he added, it wasn’t a firefight or a rocket attack.

Greg: “A local national came through that was reported to be an enlisted personal in the Iraqi Air Force. He had been interviewed half a dozen times and each time he’d been cleared. But I was lucky enough to have done an interview or two in my years in narcotics and organized crime unit, so I knew how to read people and look beyond the obvious.

“The first thing I noticed was the man’s speech. He was educated, sat erect and looked me in the eye when he spoke. I had done all of my research on the guy and on the face of it, nothing seemed out of place. But that gut feeling I had told me something was wrong. I just didn’t know what it was.

“I asked all the basic questions, but he was totally cool. But as any country boy will tell you when all else fails, try sitting down and shooting the shit…

“So during the next half hour or so that’s what I did. We talked weather, families, vacations…

“Notice I said vacations, which may not seem like a hot intelligence topic but when the man said he had taken his family to Yemen for vacation all kinds of bells went off…

“First, for a mere enlisted man to get permission to leave Iraq with his family under Saddam was no easy task. It was next to impossible. Unless of course he was not what he would have liked us to believe.

“It took a while, but with a bit more scratching I was able to establish that the guy had been an intelligence officer for Saddam Hussein, and pretty far up that ladder as well. Before the 2003 invasion, he’d been sent to Yemen to set up a bunch of sleeper cells for Saddam. That established, we gently escorted him over to the next level of intelligence officers and few hours’ later two men with foreign accents, driving blacked-out SUVs, had this guy with a hood over his head in the back seat.

“I was watching this and wondered… What the hell is going on and who are these guys”?

As Greg commented, there are some questions that you don’t want the answers to…

Last heard, in October 2013, Greg was winging his way back to Afghanistan. He’d decided to go back to working bomb dogs.

“I’ll be assigned to a WPS (Worldwide Protection Service) diplomatic team,” he e-mailed me.

“Life’s good on the edge… the view is much better,” he commented.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Though initially prevented from flying Angolan Air Force sophisticated jet fighters and bombers – such as this one parked at Luanda Airport (top) – it wasn't long before South African mercenary aviators were at the controls of them all – MiG-23s, Sukhois as well as Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters. (Photo: Author's collection) In contrast, few soldiers of fortune were involved in Uganda's guerrilla war but they were mainly linked to that country's miniscule air force and were spared dramatic scenes like these skeletal remains that were to be seen all over the country by the time Idi Amin had been forced to flee. (Photo: Author) Below: the CIA hired expatriate Cuban pilots off the streets of Miami to fly ground support planes in the Congo. (Photo: Courtesy of the Leif Hellström collection)



More images from the CIA-sponsored anti-guerrilla war in the Congo of the 1960s which involved large numbers of mercenaries. The photo top left shows a rocket strike on enemy boats that had been using Lake Tanganyika as a supply conduit, while opposite, unloading from a US Air Force transporter one of the Swift boats that the Americans deployed in Vietnam. These craft were used against the insurgents on some of Africa's great lakes. (Photos courtesy of the Leif Hellström collection)


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U.S. AIR FORCE
MATS



Top: training ground Central Africa where mercenaries have been involved for many years (Photo: Author's collection) and two scenes from the Sierra Leone civil war. Below: "Ambush Alley" on the road east from Freetown and an insert of American Vietnam veteran Bob MacKenzie, that country's first white military commander who was killed in an attack on the rebels, tortured and eaten. (Photo: Author's collection)




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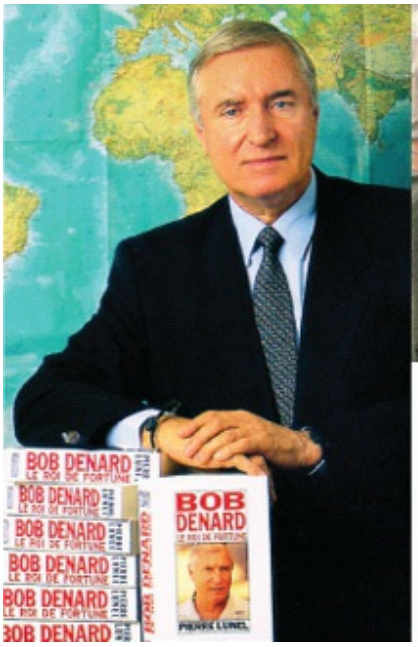
A variety of shots from the Congo, courtesy of the Leif Hellström collection, showing the various air assets used against both the United Nations and anti-government rebels. The bottom photo depicts one of the WW2-vintage Trojan trainer/ground-support aircraft provided by the CIA and flown by Cuban expatriate pilots from Miami.



Top: Dave Atkinson flew in the Congo as a mercenary for Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe for almost two years, mostly in chopper gunships protecting the diamond mines of the leader and his generals. Things were tough then, with little control or support from Harare. (Photo: Author) Below: Mykle, one of America's best-known mercs went on to make a series of TV films after he had served with ICI-Oregon in the Sierra Leone war. Said it was a better option than getting himself shot at every other day. This photo emerged after he had returned from Colombia. (Photo: Author's collection)







Colonel Bob Denard, one of the most famous mercenary commanders of his era, fought in numerous conflicts, including against President Gamal Nasser's Egyptian Army after he had decided to subjugate Yemen. The British government decided to counter that move and sent in an SAS force commanded by Colonel Jim Johnson, who hired Arab and French mercenaries to sabotage Egyptian strongholds, airports and aircraft. (Photos from Fiona Capstick's and author's collections) The bottom photo,

courtesy of Leif Hellström, was taken when Denard was involved in the Congo.





South African mercenaries in Angola played a significant role in forcing the rebel leader Jonas Savimbi to sue for peace, temporary though it was. Planning for all bush operations was meticulous from the start of their involvement. Executive Outcomes was also responsible for training tank crews mustered to fight rebel forces around the diamond fields in the east. (Photos: Author’s collection)





Top: former SADF Recce commander Hennie Blaauw during an improvised order group prior to

attacking the diamond town of Cafunfo in Angola. (Photo: Hennie Blaauw) Below: Jonny Maas, one of the EO instructors at the Lomba River training base. (Photo: Author)





South African Mercenaries active on the ground and in the air, in this case, flying Pilatus PC-7 ground support aircraft with below wing-mounted rocket pods in Angola (Photo: Werner Luddick) contrasted with one of the side gunners onboard an Executive Outcomes Mi-17 and below, the Sierra Leone town of Wara Wara Hills after taking a pounding from Neall Ellis' Hind. (Photo: Author)





Top: South African mercs prepare for action in Eastern Angola, on this occasion dropped by helicopter behind rebel lines. (Photo: Hennie Blaauw) Below: the lone Soviet-era BMP-2 amphibious infantry fighting vehicle deployed in the Biaima attack on a rebel base in Sierra Leone. (Photo: Author)





Two Sierra Leone images – Top: the late Fred Marafono preparing for a sortie under the front bubble of Neall Ellis's helicopter gunship. (Photo: Author's collection) Below: French merc "Christian" in action with his GPMG at the back. (Photo: Author)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More West African images, including our combat group approaching rebel positions in the jungle; unloading rockets for the Hind and below, Neall Ellis's beloved "Bokkie", the antiquated Mi-17 that he and his partner Hassan Delbani used to evacuate hundreds of refugees from behind rebel positions around Freetown (Photos: Author)





Top: Neall Ellis at the controls of his Mi-24. Below: ground crew at the Aberdeen base prepare the

gunship for take-off. (Photos: Author)







Top: Fred Marafono on the helipad in Freetown prior to take-off; Left: two rebels killed in the Biaima attack, their bodies promptly stripped of anything useable by government troops; Below left: Roelf van Heerden and his multifarious “gang” at Koidu; Below right: Neall Ellis and partner Hassan prepare for the day’s action at their little office in the headquarters compound in Freetown. (Photos: Author, except that of van Heerden and Marafono which are part of his collection)





Top: fighting a mercenary war in West Africa is both demanding and debilitating. Americans who have been involved there tend to compare it to Vietnam: poor roads, unending jungle – sometimes from one horizon to the other – oppressive heat and tropical diseases. Below: Lungi International Airport where passengers in transit were sometimes offered glimpses of white mercenaries going about their business

in Black Africa. The insert shows a Hind engine being replaced in an open air workshop in Sierra Leone. (Photos: Author)



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TAKING ANGOLA'S DIAMOND FIELDS FROM THE REBELS

"Private armies are a far cry from the Sixties dogs of war."

John Keegan, Former Defense Correspondent,
Daily Telegraph, London.

With Angola's armor, ground and air assets preparing for battle, Cafunfo became the magic word. Nobody had any doubt that the rebels would eventually be dislodged: there was a new bearded bunch of toughies on the block and Luanda was confident that as with Soyo, they would do the trick.

Several years before, UNITA had taken possession of the huge alluvial diggings on which Cafunfo stands and it was those gems – "blood diamonds" as the politically correct like to call them – that continued to fuel Jonas Savimbi's war.

The task ahead was daunting. There were innumerable delays, false starts and cancellations, and much of the obfuscation could be sourced to Luanda's mind-blowing bureaucracy. At one stage a group of MPLA political commissars[1] arrived at Saurimo. They jackbooted about the base and demanded to know about things that were not only of no concern to them, but had nothing to do with the campaign ahead. A quick radio call to Luanda from Hennie Blaauw got them back on their plane.

In Saurimo, in the preparatory stages of this coming series of battles, there were endless messages, contradictions, debates, not a few heated arguments as well as a question or two that sometimes made sense. Forms had to be completed (sometimes in quintuplicate), much of it coupled to order groups and staff meetings. Additionally, strings of military brass would flip in and

out of the capital. Kafka would have loved the place, especially since most of the senior Angolan commanders had been put through their paces in the Soviet Union: they liked to do things by the book and the South Africans didn't.

That, in essence, was the start of it. Issues were further compounded by delays in the supply of men, equipment and machines, none of which was helped by the fact that Luanda lay on the far side of the country.



While Executive Outcomes was fighting insurgents in Angola, there were many abandoned or derelict fighter aircraft and helicopters littering the fringes of the runways, including this Soviet Sukhoi bomber and Mi-17 chopper at the Saurimo air base. Some of this sophisticated equipment would have gladdened any illegal arms dealer's black heart…(Photo: Author)

To cap it, Executive Outcomes had to contend with staff officers who sometimes nurtured their own agendas, petty jealousies that became squabbles, equipment that didn't perform and spare parts that would disappear within an hour of arrival or didn't fit because they weren't the ones that had been ordered. Not to mention an army that seemed permanently smashed or, more often, was smoking something noxious.

Even Angolan pilots, who with their South African counterparts were to be part of the show, weren't immune to inanities. There were a number of aircraft involved in accidents, with those at the controls later found to be drunk. One such pilot took an Mi-17 out and after cutting enough of a crooked line across the skies above Saurimo to have everybody on the ground

gaping, he brought the helicopter down with a thud. Several rotors snapped and the chopper's undercarriage buckled on impact. Unlike civilian aircrews, this crowd *wasn't* regarded as expendable and such transgressions were ignored, most times, anyway.

Weather in that part of tropical Africa seemed to have a priority all its own. Though it was technically winter in the Southern Hemisphere, the occasional storm – black, billowing cu-nim – would roll in and make things miserable. There would be downpours that would make quagmires of areas half the size of the Netherlands.

Finally, there was the rebel leader Dr Jonas Savimbi. A tough adversary whose entire career revolved around taking absurd chances, he had never been a pushover. Together, all these factors in concert seemed ready to end everything before it began.

For all this, whenever things looked hopeless, somebody would recall that EO had done it before. Never mind that the circumstances at Soyo were different, it had already been demonstrated that the UNITA nut could be cracked. Throughout, even when there were sharp differences between Blaauw and the FAA high command – which was often, because the approach to most things military by so many of these Angolan brigadiers was cumbersome and intransigent – it was taken for granted that this tough bunch of mercenaries would repeat the process.

In reality, Cafunfo would be a critical test of the firm's ability to counter UNITA insurgency across a huge swathe of the interior. Every one of those involved knew that without his diamonds, Savimbi would falter. Thus, should the boys fail in their efforts, the implications weren't lost on any of Eeben Barlow's people. Future PMC contracts stood or fell by the outcome of this encounter.

Hennie Blaauw explained some of it shortly after I arrived in the diamond capital. He pulled out a set of Angolan government maps of the northwest. Marked in bold capital letters across the top was the word, in Portuguese: *SECRETO*.

The Cuango, the river on which Cafunfo lay, he explained, emptied into the Congo. It also drained much of the huge Malange basin. Penciled in across the chart were tiny shields of crossed picks and shovels – geological markings that identified diggings: gold, diamonds, iron ore, aluminum and the rest. Many of these highlighted diamondiferous pipes and alluvial diamond fields, stretching all the way to the Congo's frontier and beyond. A

source at De Beers confirmed afterwards that the entire riverine region was regarded by some geologists as among the richest diamond deposits in the world.

With a stubby, nicotine-stained finger Blaauw poked at a few places until he finally found what he was looking for and chortled in Afrikaans: "*Ja. Hier's dit!*" ("Yes, here it is!").

That place was Firiquichi, he declared, pulling himself up to full stretch. With a hefty Scotch in one hand and the map in the other, he added that I probably wouldn't find it on any conventional chart. He and the others who went in with him weren't to know it until afterwards, but just about everything that eventually took place in a succession of battles lasting a month hinged on that tiny anonymous cluster of grass huts in the African jungle.

When the armored column eventually did transmogrify itself into a potent fighting force – part of it having moved overland across Angola from Luanda with the rest coming out of Saurimo in the east – it comprised about a hundred vehicles. Apart from the twenty-eight BMP-2s, all of them brand new, there were an additional sixty logistic and fire-support vehicles, among them several Russian bridge-building TMMs.

In terms of manpower, there were about five hundred FAA troops altogether, many of them trained at Wynand du Toit's Rio Longa base. They, in turn, were supported by a couple of hundred EO mercs, the majority black.

Also in this array was a group a hundred Katangese regulars, hard aggressive combatants who years before had fled Zaire and taken refuge in Angola. Though older than the rest, everybody knew that they could dish it out when they had to. Blaauw regarded them as a rather odd, irascible French-speaking bunch, but as everybody knew, they kept themselves in a constant state of readiness for the day that they could return in triumph to the old country.

On the road to Cafunfo they were to prove their worth many times over, even though Colonel André, their leader, was sometimes unnecessarily castigated by his Angolan counterparts. For Blaauw that ached, because it was sometimes done in the presence of junior officers and as far as this veteran was concerned, that just wasn't on. But then, as even he would admit, the Angolan military code of ethics was very different from his own. This former Recce commander was old school and he played by the rules.

There was no doubt, he recalled afterwards, that the Katangese had seen a lot of fighting. With Angolan support, they had launched three bloody invasions of Zaire against the hated Mobutu regime in the previous twenty years: the last time they'd tried to take the copper mining town of Kolwezi in what was once called Katanga. Twice they were beaten off, but only after the tyrant had appealed to Europe for help. Both times a combined force of French parachutists and Legionnaires were sent to Africa to sort things out[2].



The author accompanied Hennie Blaauw and the local Angolan military commander to an isolated diamond-rich location north of Saurimo during his visit. This was a dangerous area, much of it mined and ambushes were regular. (Photo: Author)

The armored thrust on Cafunfo would eventually cover hundreds of miles across some of the most difficult bush country on any continent.

As Blaauw commented: "We knew from the start that it would be as tough as anything we'd experienced." And since there was no way of predicting events, they could only guess what UNITA would pull out of the hat.

In the end, the operation – in its various disjointed phases – lasted three

months, though the final stage out of Cacolo took only twenty-five days, during which the Angolans had to literally carve their own route through the bush. Throughout, the column was harassed by a succession of attacks, ambushes and mortar standoffs, an average of about four or five assaults a day. At one stage they were hurling 60 mm mortars at the column as if they were firecrackers. There were also landmines laid by Savimbi's people but because the attackers covered virgin ground almost from the start, there was no way that UNITA commanders could predict which route the mobile force would follow.

A glance at the *dagboek* (diary) kept by Hennie Blaauw for the duration provides something of an insight. This extract is from the final stages of the march on July 25, 1994, the day before Cafunfo was overrun.

His measurements are metric while non-italic notes (in brackets) are for the readers' benefit:

0829 *Mortar fire from 100 meters ahead. Line of UNITA infantry behind. BMP throws a track. Scramble MiGs* (MiG-23s)

0940 *MiGs in air taking heavy 23 mm fire from positions around us. More UNITA troops in trenches near thick bush. BMPs overrun them. 250 kg aerial bomb falls 100 meters behind us. Close! Mortars incoming!*

1126 *Move column forward. Prepare mortars and artillery for reaction. UNITA on left flank and hitting us. Nick wounded in lung* (presumably Nick Hayes who later died in a South African hospital). *About 60 enemy dead*

1215 *Move into town, more mortar and small arms. Heavy going!*

1320 *Another contact. FAA soldiers fired rifle grenades at enemy from behind us and almost hit our BMPs! Gadaffi wounded* (a black EO operator who was seriously wounded in Sierra Leone fifteen months later).

1410 *Stopped for eats. Instructed drivers to go on both sides of the track rather than on it because of mines. Two sections in front, one in depth. Caught UNITA patrol on open ground. All killed*

1455 *Mortar and small arms incoming*

1537 *Reach Alberto Fernandez. Go round town. Heavy incoming. Hatches down. Just go! Mines!*

1600 *Into TB* (temporary base). *Overnight.*

Colonel Blaauw made two further observations. The first regarded night flying activity by the Pilatus Porter PC-7. Louwrens Bosch – using his 68 mm rockets – hit two UNITA trucks moving through thick bush, having targeted their lights. "*Huge explosions*" was scribbled in the margin. The other mentioned the enemy using their ZSU-23s in ground support roles in conjunction with mortar fire. That took place a few hours later. As usual, *die waens* (the wagons), as he phrased it, had been pulled round into a traditional Boer laager position. Earlier, Blaauw had ordered his men to dig slit trenches at least 2 feet deep though most, because of the intensity of incoming fire, went down half as much again.

It was a complicated process getting all the components together for what was to become the biggest single FAA operation of the war. The airlift of BMP-2s to the east began in February 1994 and even that took longer than anticipated because there was always something else that needed shifting.

Originally EO management had put forward the proposal that for logistical, maintenance and other reasons, the entire force be marshaled at Saurimo. But this proved impractical and the onslaught became two-pronged. Thus, once FAA's heavy duty Russian-built Ural logistics vehicles arrived, Combat Group Bravo with Brigadier Pepe de Castro in command – together with Roelf van Heerden and the rest of the mercenary force in tow – departed Saurimo on April 21. The PC-7s had arrived the previous month.

An immediate problem facing Luanda was that most of the bridges linking Saurimo with the west had been destroyed. Also, all approach roads were mined, which was why the column struck out first towards the east, then south and finally northwest towards the junction town of Cacolo, where they would integrate with Combat Force Alpha.

Mines were more of a problem than at first anticipated and within a week several BMP-2s had been knocked out. Every single road that the enemy thought might be used by the attacking force was seeded with these bombs, many of them command-activated from higher ground. UN specialist teams said afterwards that it would take years to clear the main roads, never mind

secondaries[3].

Also, fuel for the air support element became so much of an issue that the MiG-23s (which only became operational in the sector in mid-May) were grounded halfway through. Eventually the problem was partly solved by aircrews tapping fuel directly into their fighters from the tanks of the cargo planes that regularly flew into Saurimo.



One of the black soldiers serving with Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone. These were all troops who had fought with their white compadres in Southern Africa and had formed close links over years of combat. When the white officers were hired by the private company, they took their old buddies with

them. (Photo: Author)

Totally unexpectedly, Roelf van Heerden – major offensive or not – decided that he had to go back to South Africa. His wife was having a baby. The always-affable Blaauw was delighted. He'd been kicking rocks back in Cabo Ledo and he wouldn't have missed what was to turn some of the best action of his life. Always keen for a scrap, Blaauw probably would have paid the Angolans to let him go.

Flown to Saurimo on June 1 and having been familiarized with what was going on in the field at EO's command center, he was taken in one of the Mi-17s to join the column at Tchicuza the next day. As it happened, Blaauw was to become de Castro's most valued counselor; in fact, it wasn't long before the South African led most of the day-to-day planning sessions in the field.

Advisor or not, Blaauw also countered some of de Castro's more debatable decisions: irrational man that he was, the Angolan brigadier often let emotion rule.

The first phase of the operation – after several punch-ups with UNITA at Dala, Alto Chicapa and Cucumbi – was the capture of the crossroads town of Cacolo from where all routes, such as they were, led to Cafunfo. But first the Alto Quilo River had to be bridged by a TMM team. Only two of these mechanical systems were allocated to the force and they were carefully husbanded. Without them, the column would have been halted dozens of times and in the end, probably wouldn't have got anywhere near the target.

Also included was what some of the South Africans regarded as their most valuable asset of all, a Caterpillar front-end loader. At one stage it was almost discarded in a sloppy recovery operation that had been directed by de Castro. On a whim, the Angolan officer decided that because the machine didn't work quite like he thought it should, it would have to go. He'd already given instructions for it to be blown up and it took a hefty argument from Blaauw to persuade de Castro to desist.

And it was just as well he didn't. Several times the column ground to a halt, paralyzed because of obstacles. This usually happened at rivers where vehicles might have tumbled into the water because bridges weren't level or they hadn't been built strongly enough to take armor. Then this extremely versatile, reliable old machine would by hauled forward to remove whatever was causing the commotion.

Supplies were a problem from the word go. Everything had to be flown in

to a mobile force that could never predict in advance where it would be at any specific time. For this reason, EO personnel spent long hours prior to the operation planning air drops with former Soviet pilots who were flying Ilyushin-76s on contract for the government.

“We couldn’t afford mistakes while we were out there. So we would improvise as we went, usually working with our pilots when looking for safe drop zones. They’d do an aerial recce for us and come back with suggestions about likely places where a drop might be able to happen. At the same time, the guys bringing the stuff to us had to be scrupulously familiar with our routines, which were always flexible. Everything that might be needed was listed. We prepared pages of detailed instructions, where everything was stored or from whom it could be ordered. Then followed complicated delivery arrangements, which also had to be coordinated, a nightmare in a city like Luanda. With all these factors in mind, we established some good parameters for the drops,” Blaauw explained.

Supply drops were made from about 20,000 feet with between sixteen and twenty drogue-stabilized pallets per flight. Each time about twenty tons of fuel, food, spare parts and medical needs would freefall to about 1,000 feet where KAP-3 systems would automatically open the chutes. Obviously, altitude had to be strictly maintained because of the threat of SAMs.

“It was all very professionally done. The Russkies dropped their cargoes spot-on and never missed a drop zone. Actually, they were a real pleasure to work with” said the former Reconnaissance Regiment colonel, speaking of his former enemies.

UNITA threw everything they could into the war which, as some of the men commented afterwards, might have become a rout had the rebels been anything of a lesser adversary. Though UNITA hardware was every bit as good as that used by the FAA, Savimbi’s combatants – many of them crack specialists with years of bush war experience – were in an altogether different class.

At the same time, there was evidence of extreme hardship endured by many rebel units. As could be seen from casualties after a battle, nearly every UNITA soldier was malnourished. Also, in many instances, their uniforms were threadbare. They would use rucksacks that were made of sacking and sometimes didn’t even have slings for their AKs. So they made their own of a rough bark that had been treated and made malleable.

UNITA would attack wherever and whenever the opportunity presented

itself, which underscored a determination that was not only fierce but also dedicated. According to Blaauw, while the rebels did cause damage, their efforts had very little effect on the BMPs in the end.

"We would shut our hatches and plough right through their lines, sometimes right over the top of their bunkers and trenches… they suffered terrible losses," he declared.

"We'd be traveling along in the bush in line-ahead and as soon as we heard those distinctive mortars 'plop…plop…plop', we'd close down everything and go. Sometimes their aim was well off but even when they homed in on us, their sixties had little effect. The BMPs were built to take a 60 mm hit and when that happened, the guys inside would be deaf for a week, their eardrums blown. Were 81 mm mortars used instead, it would have been another story…"

The route to Cafunfo chosen by Blaauw and de Castro was a series of remote bush tracks to the north of the main Cacolo-Cuango road. A second, smaller column made a perfunctory feint westwards from Cacolo to keep the enemy guessing. In fact, said Blaauw, either of the forces could have ended up in the diamond fields, so it was a good, practical approach to anything that Savimbi might have planned in the way of interdiction.

"They'd actually expected us to hog the road. So Savimbi planned accordingly. He ordered that huge supplies of mines and booby traps be lugged south from the Cafunfo area in preparation for the confrontation. More significant, they never believed that we'd go in a straight line right across Africa."

That had also never been tried before in the war, even though the South Africans had used the tactic often enough in decades past on their cross-border raids against the Angolans and Cubans.

One of the immediate effects of these developments, observed Duncan Rykaart, Blaauw's deputy, was that UNITA's crew-served weapons – artillery and some of the heavier stuff – were invariably out of position. They would usually end up a day or two from where the real action was. "Also, they couldn't move them about that easily because just about anything mobile on the roads was blasted by our pilots."

"Of course, those guys helped enormously. The MiGs and Porters flown by Bosch and Pine Pienaar and the others would plaster a UNITA town long

before we got there. Then they'd zap them again as we approached." The ploy underscored one of the fundamental principles of modern warfare: the field commander who controls the skies, dominates everything.

Not everything went to plan, though. On July 15, shortly after UNITA had been ousted from Cafunfo, the usual two Mi-17s arrived at the town from Saurimo, did a dummy delivery to confuse Savimbi's artillery spotters across the river and proceeded to the real LZ. Just about then a call came through on the radio from Louwrens Bosch who had been circling an area to the north of them all in a PC-7.

"I've been hit," he snapped into the intercom, adding that the plane was on fire. He was going to have to put her down, he shouted because there were flames all around him in the cockpit. Even more disconcerting to those listening was that Bosch had been operating alongside the river, well within the UNITA orbit of activity. With Walker and Alberts in the one Hip and Joubert and Linde in the other, the situation was critical.

As Arthur Walker said afterwards, it was probably a SAM-14 that had caused the damage. He had flown with Bosch often enough in the past and knew that the Pilatus pilot would always joke about having eyes behind his head. In any event, stressed Walker, the man wasn't one to take unnecessary chances.

By Arthur Walker's reckoning Bosch was one of the best pilots with whom he'd worked: "Good man, brave, competent and resourceful and I don't only say that because he's gone. He really was one of the best. Whether at the controls of a Pilatus or a MiG-23, Louwrens would always reconnoiter a position beforehand and decide on what action to take. For him, it was that kind of war," his old buddy reckoned.

What happened afterwards developed into a tragic sequence of events. Not only did Bosch crash-land his PC-7 in thick bush – which resulted in a wipeout of his aircraft – but also he and his observer, Skeurkogel, were able to get out of the wreck and make their way to a nearby road for a pick-up. All this time he was able to stay in touch with the choppers heading his way. To do this, he used his little hand-held VHF Bendix King.

Quietly, methodically Louwrens Bosch guided the incoming Mi-17 towards the two survivors. The area, as he characteristically phrased it in Afrikaans, was "*vrot met die vyand*" (rotten with the enemy). He could hear them coming, he told Walker and Alberts breathlessly, indicating that he'd been hurt in the crash landing. A short while later Bosch told them that he

had their Mi-17 visual. The enemy was also approaching fast, he warned. “They’re coming in hard… the bastards are really after us,” he told the others.

“The odds were impossible,” was Walker’s contention several years afterwards. Undeterred, Louwrens Bosch set about trying to find somewhere for the approaching helicopter to put down in fairly heavy bush country, but by then UNITA forces were closing in on all sides.

Looking back on what was to have been a rescue, it’s Walker’s view that things on board their Mi-17 might have been a bit better had their regular side gunner been with them. But this was an emergency and the moment the order came, they went up “cold” with only themselves and their Angolan tech Tito Nunes to help. Ideally, they might have carried a search and rescue team, but there was no time to get it together.

Walker: “The last two clicks were what I suppose you’d call a hell-run. We were flying fairly low and were taking fire along the entire distance. They threw everything at us – even a couple of 12.7s and 14.5s. Of course, everybody and his uncle had his AK and they were shooting at us too. Meanwhile, we kept talking to Louwrens and by the time the two of them came into view, he was able to direct us almost right on top of his position.”

What happened next is not altogether clear. Because of the volume of fire, Alberts headed in at a steep rate of descent. As he flared, the ground was suddenly enveloped in billowing dust. The last thing they’d expected in a terrain covered in thick vegetation was a “brown-out”. Also, comms with the Angolan tech Nunes also didn’t work all that well because he understood little English.

The three of them felt the chopper shudder as their wheels touched. The crew thought they might have taken a hit. Moments later the Hip began to shake violently and then veered uncontrollably to one side. Since they were on the ground anyway, Walker urged Nunes to hop out and lead the two men on board.

“This was really one helluva situation for us, because by now we could see squads of UNITA troops racing down the road towards us,” said Alberts. The first group of enemy soldiers was coming at double pace over a small rise only two or three hundred yards from where we had put down and they would fire their guns intermittently as they rushed in.



These two infantry fighting vehicles accompanied the Executive Outcomes Fire Force commanded by Cobus Claassens when we hit the rebel base at Baiama in Eastern Sierra Leone. (Photo: Author)

Nunes was back onboard the Hip almost immediately afterwards. The men weren't there, he screamed, indicating with arms raised that they should get away. More volleys came whistling by.

Alberts needed no encouragement. He lifted his chopper off the deck but the shuddering became so severe the moment he pulled power that for a moment or two neither he nor Walker were sure whether they'd actually be able to control the machine. Somehow Alberts managed. Walker thought they'd lost their tail rotor, or at least part of it.

In those few moments in the hover before pulling away, the two pilots spotted a prone figure lying face down on the ground alongside the LZ. Both agreed afterwards that Bosch's blue flying jacket was unmistakable. From what little they could see from the cockpit, it seemed as if he'd taken a hit from the tail rotor.

In the investigation that followed a while later back at base, it was concluded that because of the volume of dust whipped up in their descent, Bosch might have become disoriented and possibly walked into the rotor. Visibility on the ground was almost zero at the time and the chopper wasn't completely stationary, so it was feasible. Of the other man, "Skeeries" Skeurkogel, there was no trace.

It took about a minute before Walker and Alberts were able to get clear of that commotion and head away, but again, there was stuff coming at them from all over. At one stage they even clipped the tops of a row of trees to get away.

Though the entire episode had lasted perhaps two minutes, Alberts had a tough time controlling the machine. In retrospect, it says a lot for his experience that he managed to get back to base. At one stage the vibrations got so severe that they thought the machine might rip itself apart. Eventually he put the Hip down on a road about three or four miles north of the town, but still behind enemy lines. By now "Juba" Joubert and J.C. Linde were circling in the other Mi-17.

Once down, the two South Africans did a quick damage assessment and decided that it was pointless to linger. The helicopter was in a bad way but not totally incapacitated. They would chance it, they told the other two, but suggested that they stayed real close.

As Walker recalls, the tail rotor had obviously hit something. The blades were twisted and one had all but been ripped off. In fact, looking at it afterwards, it was clear that the entire rotor was off kilter. In theory, they shouldn't even have been able to get airborne. But they did, which is also a tribute to Russian engineering. The machines they make are not pretty, but they work under the most arduous conditions, even when damaged.

On Van Heerden's instructions, two BMP-2 IFVs were dispatched to the site the next day: they had to fight hard to get in and, having poked about a bit, get out again. In the end, nothing was found. The wreck, by now incinerated, was still where it had come to rest among the trees. There were scraps of flesh and some blood marks on the ground at the LZ where a body seems to have been dragged to a vehicle. But of the two men, not a trace.

Radio intercepts later spoke of a capture, but there never was any word of the fate of "Skeeries."

It was ironic that it had to happen to him because Skeurkogel was an EO non-combatant personnel officer based permanently at Saurimo. It was also his first operational flight. As the pilots recalled afterwards, he'd sit in on some of the debriefs and watch the proceedings through his thick "coke bottle" glasses. Afterwards he'd ask to be allowed to fly with the guys.

"Just once," he would plead. But there were always other priorities and anyway, the brass didn't want anybody taking unnecessary risks. On that

fateful day, with Duncan Rykaart in Cabo Ledo, Louwrens Bosch thought: What the hell? He'd give "Skeeries" the experience of his life.

In the end, sadly, he did exactly that. Skeurkogel had craved long and hard his "spin with the boys," but the outcome was disastrous.

On the ground a short while before the Bosch affair, the column had made remarkable progress. Colonel Blaauw attributes a lot of it to what he regards as one of the most remarkable fighting machines of the modern period, the Soviet-era amphibious BMP-2.

A product of the Cold War, this 14 ton infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) first appeared in public in Moscow during a 1982 parade. Since then it has found its way into many Third World conflicts. Although originally designed for the battlefields of Europe, this classic tracked troop carrier with its distinctive pointed nose and almost horizontal ribbed glacis plate has always performed well in difficult African terrain. Usually carrying ten men, which included a three-man crew, the Angolan versions came with 30 mm cannon mounted together with a coaxial 7.62 mm machine gun.

In all, said Rykaart, it's a pretty formidable weapon and only a direct hit with an armor-piercing RPG grenade or a heavy mortar can cause serious damage. It was his view that the BMP was the best vehicle for the job. Also, the terrain being primeval, its tracks were an advantage over wheels whose tires were vulnerable to bullets and mortar shell fragments. Its secret, said Blaauw, was that it needs almost no regular maintenance. "As long as it is kept greased and its water and oil kept topped up, the BMP-2 will accomplish everything that is expected of it, including lengthy safaris across the face of Africa."

Like many other Western force commanders who only got the feel of Soviet hardware in later years, Blaauw always talked well of this IFV, as did a subsequent group of South Africans who used it to good advantage in Sierra Leone.

Trouble was, only days out of base, the engines of at least three of the machines seized because their FAA operators didn't bother with routine maintenance when they pulled over the covers at night. They'd allowed their machines to run dry, with the result that they had to abandon them where they ground to a halt in the bush. After that, Blaauw put the word out: "If your BMP-2 fails because you didn't maintain it, you stay behind with your crippled vehicle." The prospect of being picked off or taken captive by the rebels had the required effect.

As might have been expected, the last twenty miles in Cafunfo ended in a series of land battles that were both intense and, by African standards, classic. What was obviously was that Savimbi, by now, was desperate. He threw at Combat Group Bravo all that remained of his reserves. As one of the EO officers recalls, these bush fighters would sometimes come in waves and with a total disregard for their fate. Some UNITA attacks were nothing short of suicidal because, “let’s face it, guerrilla or not, men on the ground or in soft-skinned vehicles were no match for armor.”

It says much that this burly rebel leader – who was killed in the summer of 2002 after he had been betrayed by somebody he knew well and who, in all probability, had formerly worked for him – could inspire such dedication[4]. It is also one of the reasons why Dr Jonas Savimbi is regarded as one of the best guerrilla leaders of the last half-century. Internationally he has been acclaimed and though gone, his standing remains high. In the eyes of many African revolutionaries, it’s way up there with people like Mao and Giap. In Africa’s insurgent wars there is nobody close to him in terms of ability, pertinacity and resolution.

Luanda couldn’t kill the man so they put a large amount of money on the table and brought in a group of whites… South Africans, no less, and the same people that had worked with this guerrilla leader in the early days and who would do the job for them. In trying to avoid making a martyr of the man, they ended up creating a hero, and on a continent that so desperately needs a few idols of its own, to boot. Savimbi’s star, as a consequence, will continue to shine bright in the firmament.



While government forces – headed by Hennie Blaauw and his EO contingent – were advancing on the Cafunfo diamond fields from the south, Jonas Savimbi used a bunch of private air operators to bring weapons, ammunitions and supplies into his area of operations using these old freighters, some of which had been used in the Biafran War. (Photo: Author’s collection)

Over a thirty-year period where guerrilla operations were concerned, Savimbi repeatedly showed the international community – first against all that Portugal could muster in its insurgent wars and then against the MPLA – that he was a master of the unforeseen.

By the time the Cafunfo operation happened, both UNITA's senior commanders, General Bok (Chief of Staff, Logistics) and General Ben Ben (Head of Operations and Savimbi's deputy) were driving the war from a set of bunkers in Cafunfo. In the northern sector was General Luzamba, a fine tactician with much experience of battle. The apartheid-era South African Directorate of Special Tasks personnel had originally trained them all.

The last resistance offered by UNITA was at the village of Firiquichi, where a huge rebel force had gathered together for a "Hail Mary" ambush. This was the same place that the former Recce had pointed out on the map to me when he detailed the campaign. As Blaauw recalled, they took some fire and there was a handful of FAA wounded. But in the end, it was no different from before.

As soon as the UNITA whistles sounded – another trick taught by the boys from Pretoria – the Angolan BMPs made straight for UNITA lines and overran all resistance. With that, the attackers scattered. Almost a hundred bodies were counted afterwards including one of Savimbi's most resourceful field commanders, Colonel Antonio Neves. An acknowledged expert in unconventional warfare – even by FAA's senior commanders – this was a huge loss for the rebel command.



Throughout this period there were Russian “volunteers” (Moscow preferred the euphemism) attached to many of the warring nations, such as this bunch linked to air operations in Angola. (Photo: Author)

Just after the Firiquichi line had been breached, the column had a remarkable run of luck. They were approaching Muvuca when Louwrens Bosch – overhead in his favorite PC-7 and flying one of his last sorties before he was killed – suddenly took Triple-A fire from an area of thick bush about ten miles to the north. This was unusual, Bosch reported afterwards. UNITA never wasted ammo.

The South African pilot immediately felt that there had to be something there, and being curious, he went down to have a look. Though there was nothing immediately obvious, except a partially camouflaged blue truck, he did spot a lot of tracks. Specifics were passed on to Blaauw.

The next day the South African commander decided to investigate for himself. Having been given coordinates, he detached two BMPs and with Jos Grobelaar, a former Koevoet regular, led a sortie into the bush. For once there was no resistance. Shortly afterwards they came upon those same vehicle tracks that Bosch had noticed. Having reported back to de Santos, Blaauw pushed deeper into a remote, largely unpopulated and undeveloped region.

Then things began to happen. Sending his own BMP into a craggy outgrowth, Blaauw’s people stumbled on to what must have been the biggest supply dump of the war. It was immense. As Blaauw said, it easily covered

an acre, with as much below the ground as above it. The material that had been accumulated must have taken Savimbi years to get together. Every single item had been hauled overland through the Congo, itself an often near-impossible task considering the state of that country's roads. In terms of raw diamonds mined at Cafunfo, the cache must have cost UNITA tens of millions of dollars.

"There was everything there that an army might hope for," Blaauw recalled. Carefully hidden from curious eyes were hundreds of fuel drums: at least six months' supply for the column.

Apart from more TM-57 mines that anyone had ever seen stacked together, there was hardware for 106 mm recoilless rifles, crate upon crate of ammunition for B-10s and B-12s, mortar bombs by the thousands together with millions of AK rounds. "You could have started another war with all that stuff," the South African reckoned.

Topping off that lot was a hundred tons of food: canned meats, hams, fish, vegetables and the rest, all of it in cans and good quality, like you might have found in any European supermarket. It was gone in a stroke because one bored rebel soldier fired a burst at a passing aircraft.

The reality of this catastrophe really came home when it was reported later that with those supplies alone, Savimbi might have kept the war going for several more years. It was lost, in part, because the guerrilla leader never envisioned that the attacking force would move overland through some of the most difficult terrain in Angola. Nor that their route would take them within a rifle shot of his most valuable strategic reserve.

Though Savimbi remained steadfast, not so his commanders. Some of them lost the will to continue with the struggle, said one of his senior officers after it was all over.

It was in the final approach to Cafunfo that Hennie Blaauw had what was possibly the narrowest escape of his career as a fighting man.

"I called the column to a halt fairly early one afternoon a couple of days out of Cafunfo. Because there had been harassment from UNITA after dark, some of it pretty concerted, involving mortars and encirclements, we were in the habit of bringing our vehicles round into a defensive laager. We'd arrange the BMPs so that their guns would point outwards: if we had to retaliate, it would be quick to do so.

“The forest around us was thick, typically jungle and almost impenetrable in places. The bush encroached right up to where we’d parked. It was also the season for mist, that would roll in across the valleys within an hour or of sunset and only lift again the next day about mid-morning. Although UNITA tended to mortar us whenever we stopped, we weren’t overly bothered because we’d all dug slit trenches. Or for those who preferred, they could sleep inside their IFVs.

“It wasn’t quite light when I got up the next morning and did the usual rounds. If a man was asleep at his post, it was better that I should find him than his bosses. Angolan officers and NCOs would shoot a sleeping man where he lay. We only docked their pay.”

The colonel asked his signaler-driver Paul Ditrich[5] for a roll of toilet paper. He then did what he’d spent a lifetime in Special Forces telling others not to: he set off into the bush for a dump *alone*.

“I ambled off towards a clump of bushes. By then Ditrich was headed back towards the perimeter of our defenses. Moments later, facing outwards from the column and having just undid my belt, I was watching something on my flank and not paying too much attention to what was immediately in front of me when suddenly, a rebel pops out of the bush, right there, only yards away.

“He was as surprised to see me as I was: we had eye contact for about a second.” Armed only with a toilet roll, Blaauw threw himself sideways and sprinted for the nearest BMP.

“I had perhaps twenty yards to cover when the ground erupted all around me as the enemy targeted me on full auto. A second later the entire column came under attack as a huge rebel force that had crept up close during the dark hours opened up. I got back OK, but I reckon I must have been pretty lucky to have done so.”

Blaauw was to establish later in the day that it was an attack in battalion strength: about 250 of the enemy were involved. His own people were able to retaliate immediately, something they’d learnt to do many times over. Looking back, he reckons it was probably their quick reaction time that saved them.

“Meanwhile, Ditrich, who hadn’t seen me cut and run, assumed that I’d been killed. When he heard the first volley, he turned towards where he’d left me and all he could see was a UNITA soldier, AK in hand, letting rip. He

promptly threw himself down on the ground shouting, ‘The colonel’s been shot! The colonel’s dead!’ ”

Indeed, Blaauw didn’t come out of it unscathed: he took a flesh wound in his arm, probably from an AK. He’s convinced too, that the UNITA attack had been pre-empted.

“I’m pretty sure that the entire group was not yet in its final position. In fact we heard that afterwards from a capture. There were apparently some UNITA troops that were held up for some reason or another in a shallow defile to the north of our position. Had they been there as well, things might have been a little different because they were pretty well on top of us when the shooting began… some of the enemy were lying three or four yards from us.

“Yep! I was lucky,” was his comment, adding that “it’s the first time that the outcome of a battle was decided by someone needing a shit.”

Only after UNITA had withdrawn was he able to evaluate his good fortune. The BMP behind which he had taken cover took the brunt of the onslaught. Thousands of rounds were fired at it. The firing was so intense that you couldn’t put two fingers together over any patch of armor without touching a dent where the paint had been sheared, he explained.

“Also, all the trees around our positions were cut down by the salvoes that followed. Most were completely stripped of their leaves. But then it ended as suddenly as it began because a few minutes later, when more IFVs got into the act, our attackers dropped everything and ran.”

Blaauw was pulled out later by one of the helicopters. He had his arm dressed at Saurimo and was back with his unit before nightfall.

Another equally unlikely survival story to come out of the war involved “Juba” Joubert, who was later to fly combat in Sierra Leone with Nellis. As one of the stalwarts of the Cafunfo campaign, his Mi-17 – with John Viera as his co-pilot – took a hit from a SAM-14 a few days after the column had occupied Cafunfo.

Though the aircrews had been assured that the area around the diamond town was clear of threat, including missiles, these veterans of several wars tended to remain a little circumspect and it was just as well that they did. When they were required to head for the sharp end, they flew high and came down fast – invariably in a spiral, as steep as the rotors would allow. It was the same on the way out again: straight up and then a swing away when the

required altitude had been achieved.

Cafunfo presented the same problems as anywhere else in this ongoing war. The pilots noticed that as soon as they got anywhere near to Cafunfo, UNITA guns and mortars from across the river would open up. Rebel gunners would shell the landing strip and they would keep hammering away as long as there were Hips on the ground. On that day, Walker consequently decided to put down at an old disused airstrip on the southwestern side of town.

Flying in support of Walker and Alberts, Joubert's Hip had just delivered its 2.5 ton load and taken on board about a dozen casualties for Saurimo. With that, the two Hips took off again: as Walker always said, "there's no hanging about when you've got people hurling things at you."

The two machines were about 600 feet in the air when several people on the ground saw the brilliant white flare of a missile being launched from the opposite bank. It was a SAM, somebody shouted, and its contrail showed that it was heading straight for the circling choppers.

Walker saw it first but it happened so fast that there was no time for evasive action. At Mach-2 the missile shot right past his nose and headed for Joubert, hitting his chopper's exhaust just above the starboard engine. The South African recalls an enormous explosion above his head.

Talking about the incident later, both pilots extolled the ruggedness of this Soviet-type helicopter for not being immediately knocked out of the sky. Walker has always been of the opinion that no Western helicopter would have been able to weather that kind of punishment and come out of it airworthy.

Having got onto the deck again, shaken but safe, the crews were able to examine the damage. Altogether five pockets on one of the rotor blades had been blown away. The blast missed the main spar by a fraction of an inch. If any one of the Mi-17's five blades had been sheared, it would have torn out the gearbox and they would have crashed. Exactly that had already happened to fifteen other Angolan Air Force Mi-17s in the war by the time Joubert's incident took place. Worse, there wasn't a survivor among any of them.

Nor did three more Hip crews get out alive when three more SAMs destroyed Angolan Air Force choppers in the following six months.

It's interesting that during the period that the South Africans manned Mi-17s in Northern Angola, each of the three helicopter teams was picked up at

least once by other crews after having been brought down by ground fire, which was why they always insisted on two-ship sorties. The same policy held afterwards for Sierra Leone.

But not for Neall Ellis, who, for almost two years, fought Sierra Leone's war from the air almost totally on his own. Most times he didn't even have a co-pilot (See Chapters 1-7).

1 Angola has been run along the lines of a Soviet-style Comintern state almost from the time that the Portuguese left Africa in the mid-1970s. Much of it came into play during the incumbency of the last Portuguese military governor Admiral Rosa (Red) Coutinho, a notorious communist. And what a legacy he bequeathed this sad state. As one Angolan politician was heard to comment when his duplicity was finally exposed, "a pox on his house and all his children!"

2 Both times they came at the behest of a much-beleaguered Mobutu Sese Seko.

3 "Angola: New Mines, What Ban?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Al J. Venter, Volume 55 #03, May/June 1999, pp 13/15

4 Following Dr Savimbi's death in the spring of 2002 (after being trapped in the bush by what a Luanda report said was a "Special Forces" squad) there was much speculation about who was responsible. Everything points to him having been betrayed. There have been several groups mentioned as perpetrators, including the Israelis, former Portuguese military associates and most unlikely, a squad of North Vietnamese militias (Pyongyang did assist the MPLA during hostilities against South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s). This writer was in South Africa at the time that Savimbi was killed and reliable sources indicated that a group of South Africans – all former military SF types with close links to both the NIA and Military Intelligence – were responsible. Savimbi, it will be recalled, had been lured to a meeting with people he knew and was shot nineteen times.

5 Ditrich was to die in a bizarre accident near Saurimo two months later. While he was at the wheel of a BMP-2 and crossing the Lauchimo River to the immediate east of the city, it veered off a bridge and landed upside-down in the water. Though his colleagues did what they could, Paul was dead before the machine could be righted. His passing is commemorated with the dozen or so others who were killed in company service on the granite plinth that stood in the grounds of the house in Raslouw Street in a Pretoria suburb.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FUTURE ROLE OF MERCENARIES ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

It is an ugly word, mercenary. Hardly the rough and tough of the quotidian, it conjures up images of mindless brutality and the murder of innocents. To others, it is a call to arms. In Africa, these hired guns and their gunships have not only helped save countless lives, they have changed the course of contemporary history, as a handful are now doing while operating out of Somalia and countering piracy in the Indian Ocean.

Another example is Sierra Leone where – during the course of a civil war in the 1990s – a single Mi-24 gunship twice drove rebel forces from the gates of Freetown. Thereafter, South African mercenary pilot Neall Ellis linked up with British Forces – then commanded by Brigadier David Richards (today General Sir David Richards, recently retired from the post of Chief of the Defence Staff) – and turned the war on its head.

Before that, a South African mercenary force that flew Angolan Air Force MiG-23s, as well as Mi-24 gunships and Mi-17s, ended a 30-year civil war in this much-disputed West African country.

So too with Mali, still the scene of ongoing hostilities against a resolute force – armed largely by a range of sophisticated weapons smuggled out of Libya – that remains implacably loyal to al-Qaeda. In the Sahara region these Islamic revolutionaries are referred to as AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Mahgreb).

One of the ironies of the present military campaign in Mali, with European troops that include small French and British contingents that have

remained behind in training and logistical roles, is that this war could have been cut short almost two years ago.

In February 2012, a sizeable force of South African mercenaries negotiated an $80 million deal with the former president of Mali to counter a Taureg rebellion that threatened the government. Apart from a moderate-sized ground force that would tackle the rebels on home turf, the aviation side included two Mi-24 helicopter gunships and four Mi-17 armed support helicopters.



There are many African cities that experienced insurrection in recent years, like Freetown in Sierra Leone's civil war period, seen here. More serious dislocation is almost certain to follow, as we have recently seen in Mali's Bamako and Bangui in the Central African Republic. (Photo: Author)

The private military company (PMC) involved in this venture had originally been offered six Vietnam-era Huey Cobras by an unnamed country at $1 million each. It was decided to go for helicopters of Ukrainian origin instead.

The deal for acquiring these helicopters had already been signed and money was about to change hands when Captain Amadou Sanogo, an obscure, relatively low-key officer who headed a dissident junta in the Mali

Army, launched a mutiny that toppled the Bamako government.

Almost simultaneously, AQIM routed the Malian army and seized the north of the country.

Curiously, though several African countries offered military assistance, the Sanogo regime rejected all offers, which raises other issues. He was also initially opposed to French involvement in countering this revolt, but since almost $1 billion has been offered in military aid by Western nations for "upgrading" the Mali army, the captain – who likes to compare himself with the "liberator" General de Gaulle – has since moderated his stance. That makes sense since about a fifth of the money is scheduled to pass directly under Captain Sanogo's control.

Much of what happens in this country that fringes the Sahara is unreported, including the extensive use of gunships by the French Air Force to drive the Ansar Dine Islamic group from some of the towns they captured earlier: most lie in the remote Ifogas mountain range of the desolate north. That does not mean that all AQIM forces might have vacated a specific area: in September 2012, while delivering food to soldiers of the Mali army, a United States C-130 cargo plane coming in to land at a forward operating base was struck by machine gun fire from the rebels. Nobody was injured and the plane made it safely back to Bamako, Mali's capital.

Recent reports out of South Africa suggest that following the departure of the main body of French soldiers from Mali, several Western nations are again looking at a private military option, ergo mercenaries, to replace their troops once the security situation in that country has stabilized.

The insurgency in Mali is not unique. As we go to press, guerrilla wars are being fought in more than a dozen African states. Almost all center on the exploitation of commodities that include minerals, oil, gold, precious stones, bauxite, aluminum, platinum, tropical hardwoods as well as food resources.

Among the more valuable is coltan, short for columbite-tantalite, a black tar-like mineral and a vital component in a vast array of small electronic devices like cellphones and iPads. Coltan is found in significant quantities in the Congo, which possesses about 80 percent of the world's raw coltan deposits, with Russia holding most of the balance.

So, too, with the Central African Republic, invaded late 2012 by a rebel army that originated in Chad and the Sudan. Having taken the diamond fields

around Bria in the CAR's north, this rag-tag but well-equipped unconventional force – with the backing of mercenaries from the Sudan, Egypt, Nigeria, Chad, and more recently, the Ugandan rebel movement Lord's Resistance Army – overwhelmed government forces. Interestingly, the CAR rebellion is an almost copycat version of recent bloodshed in the equally commodities-rich Eastern Congo.

Elsewhere, conflict has enveloped parts of Somalia and its Kenyan neighbor, while both Sudans remain unsettled. Additionally, the Ivory Coast teeters on the verge of north/west conflagration; Chad is virtually ungovernable and the former Portuguese colony of Guiné-Bissau has just lived through its umpteenth army coup since independence in 1975.

Before that, West Africa's Mauritania announced that it had killed AQIM leader Tiyib Ould Sidi Ali in a raid launched by its armed forces. The Algerian-born Ali was wanted for a failed bombing attempt in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital. Ali is known to have been responsible an attack on the Israeli embassy in 2008 and was plotting more violence in the region.

Nigeria, too, has come under fire from Islamic fundamentalists in an ongoing wave of brutality that knows almost no par in contemporary Africa.



Cartoon that appeared in a Durban newspaper following the abortive Seychelles mercenary invasion by Colonel Mike Hoare and friends. It was dedicated to Peter Duffy who served with Hoare in the Congo and who subsequently, with the rest of the conspirators, spent time in a South African clink for trying to overthrow a legitimate island regime.

The extent of that insurrection has been classed as a low-level guerrilla war by America's State Department and has already spilled over into the United Kingdom with the murder of a British soldier in Woolwich in May 2012. He was killed by a fanatic with a Nigerian background who had been recruited by a dissident group of that country's Islamic fundamentalists called Boko Haram (also linked to AQIM/al-Qaeda).

The level of insurrection in Nigeria is serious and escalating. Tens of thousands of people – both Muslim and Christian – have died in pogroms that center largely on religions differences as well as the country's oil rights, in part because Nigeria now supplies the United States with about a quarter of its crude oil needs. Before he was killed in Pakistan two years ago, Osama bin Laden vowed to end Nigerian oil shipments to America. In this, he and other political dissidents have been partially successful.

That said, Washington, London, Paris, Moscow and Beijing are all aware of the threat potential of these military struggles, especially since Africa is booming and foreign investors are throwing money at the continent on an unsurpassed scale.

Yet, with this largesse has come a measure of insurrection and dislocation not seen in Africa since the 1970s and 1980s.





Stewardess and her mercenary hijacker swop memories

YOGIN DEVAN

Not in her wildest dreams did Air India first class cabin stewardess, Ulka Kothare, believe she would one day sip French champagne in the warm Durban sun with her former hijacker.

But this week when she came face to face with Durban photographer Peter Duffy, she recalled he was one of the "most friendly hijackers" among the mercenaries aboard the hijacked Air India flight from Seychelles to Durban in November 1981.

Mr Duffy served 21 months of a five-year sentence for his part in the hijacking.

Over lunch this week, Mr Duffy and Ms Kothare — she arrived in Durban on a scheduled Air India flight this time — exchanged their own experiences of the hijacked flight more than 12 years ago.

Duffy was among 45 mercenaries under the command of Colonel Mike Hoare who had landed at Mahe Airport on the Seychelles to seize control of the island.

Captain Umesh Saxena who was at the controls of the Air India plane happened to be at the right time at the right place as far as the hijackers were concerned.

When the coup went all wrong the mercenaries used the Air India plane to escape.

Ms Kothare reminded Mr Duffy how she and her colleagues had been "initially scared" when the plane was hijacked. However, after a while the mercenaries' relaxed manner had set them at ease.

She also related how some "thirsty" mercenaries offered to pay for alcoholic beverages with their travellers' cheques.

"We could not accept the travellers' cheques and gave them the drinks without charge. We were scared if we refused them drinks, they would become agitated."

She also recalled how she and her colleagues attended to the shoulder gunshot wound of one of the mercenaries, Charles Dukes.

Mr Duffy told the smiling stewardess he looked forward to a "reunion party" with the crew in Bombay with Captain Saxena as the chief guest.



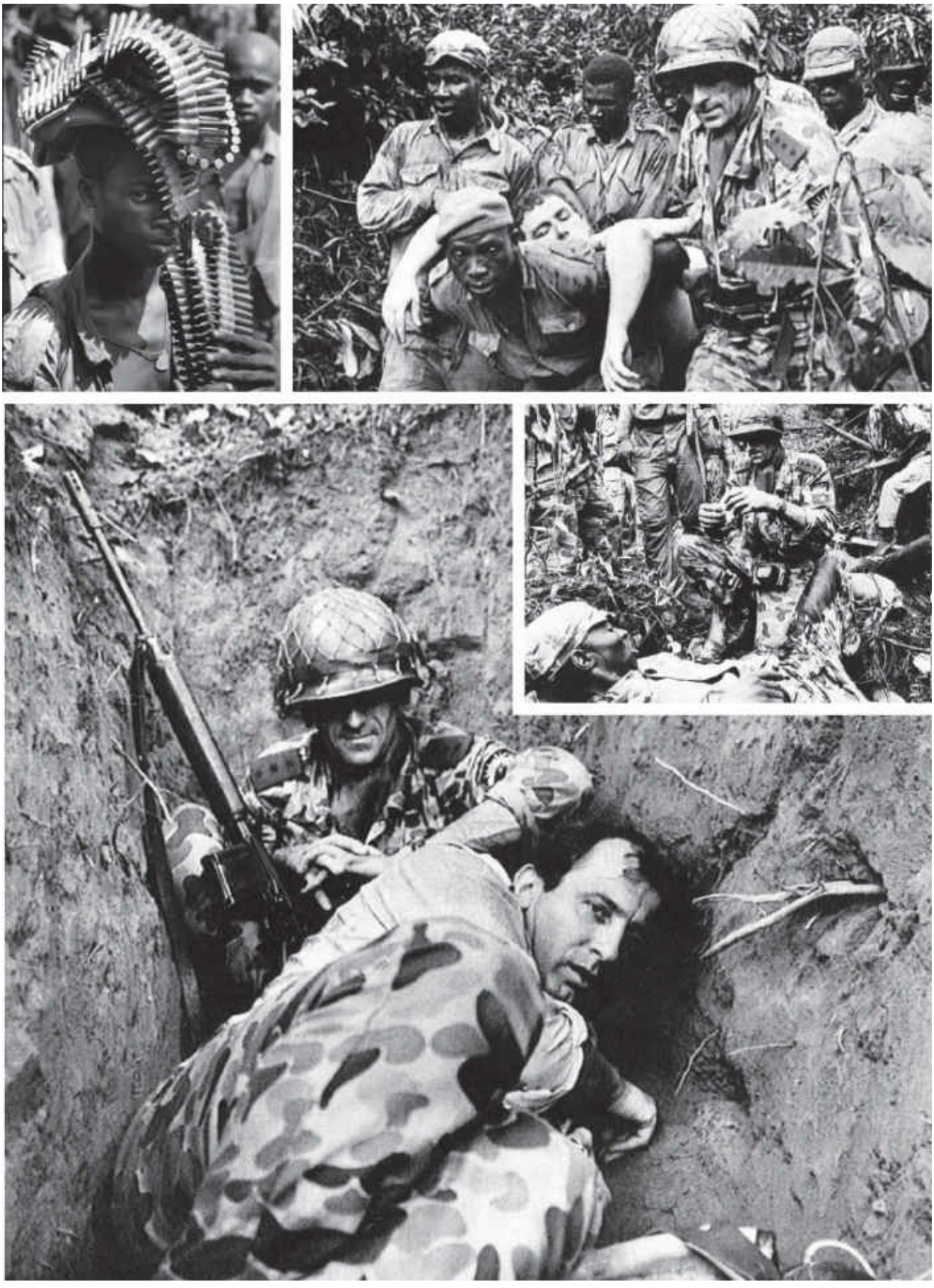
HIJACKER AND HIJACKED: Peter Duffy and cabin stewardess Ulka Kothare recall their experiences.
Picture: Grant Erskine

Some of the images that emerged from the failed Seychelles mercenary invasion, including a newspaper cutting, the Air India boeing that was hijacked to bring the South African mercenaries back to Durban, and its pilot and one of the aircraft's stewardesses. (Photos: Peter Duffy's collection)

Apart from offering military aid, technical expertise, training facilities and personnel, there is little the major powers can do to counter this kind of dislocation on the African continent. With the exception of Mali, not one of these countries is willing to commit to having its own troops go in and imposing a measure of order on the continuing chaos. The specter of body bags shipped home from Iraq and Afghanistan remains stark in the minds of Western politicians.

All of this makes particularly appropriate what William Shawcross meant when he declared that “if we want to put the world to rights and we’re not prepared to risk our own forces in doing so, then we should consider the employment of private security forces.”

The author of *Deliver Us From Evil* added that if South African mercenaries had been allowed to do the job they were intended for, before they were kicked out of Sierra Leone in 1996, “a lot of children would still have their hands and feet today…”



The short-lived West African Republic of Biafra was one of the first in modern Africa to use mercenaries within its ranks. Some went there after having fought in the Congo. French freebooter Robert Denard commanded a group that flew into the jungle airstrip at Uli one night and promptly left 24 hours later, in part because Biafra was a more brutal war than anything they had experienced before. At Pretoria's behest, South African Colonel Jan Breytenbach and some of his men were also involved, having come into the beleaguered enclave through Gabon. (Photo: Author's collection)

In truth, *US News and World Report* seemed to have had it right when it stated on December 30, 1996: "Want peacekeepers with spine? Hire the world's finest mercenaries."

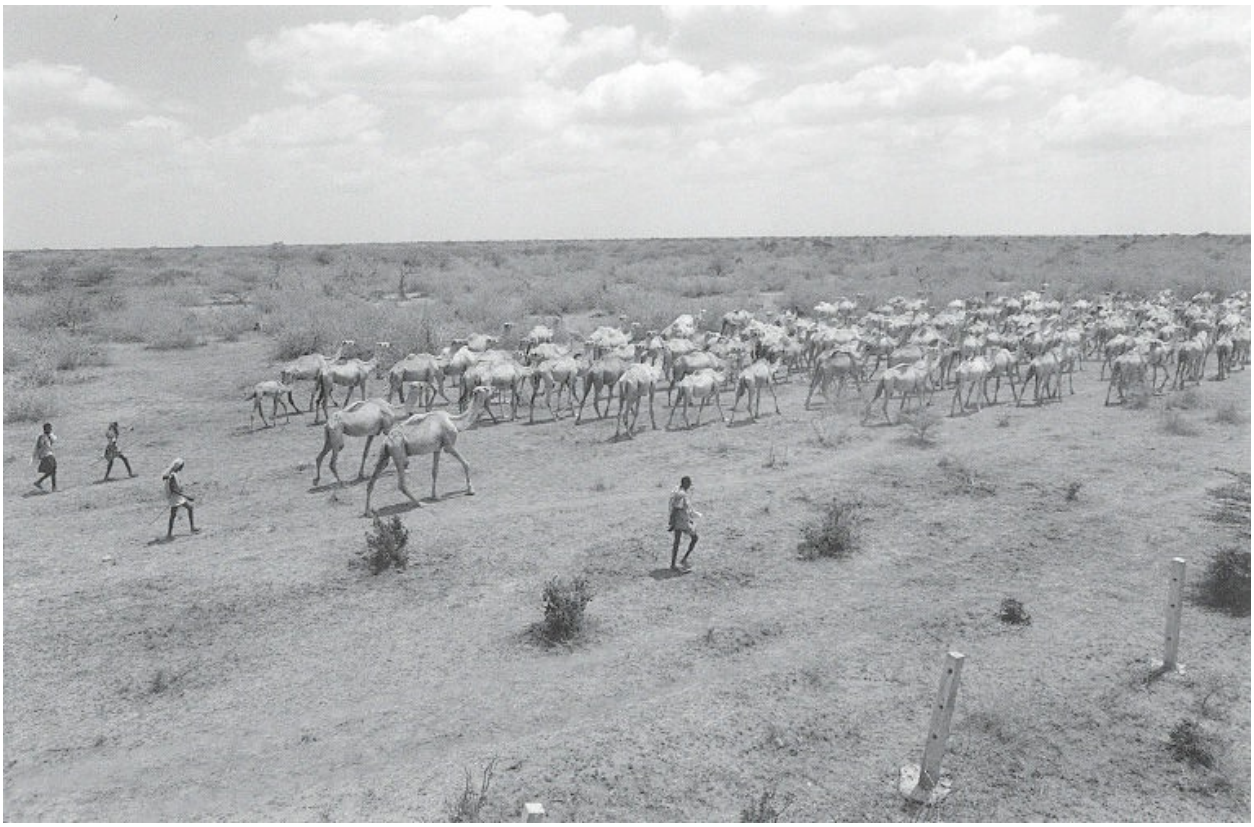
There is no question that the level of violence in Africa is escalating. Threat factors in some areas, specifically the Congo, are real enough to have a knock-on effect on some commodity market prices.

The international community is aware of these problems, underscored by US counterterrorism officials paying much attention to an increasingly dangerous incubator for extremism. Former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that "the threat from al-Qaeda's presence in the region is significant, very dangerous and potentially growing in a couple of cases." In other interviews, senior American government officials talked about recent developments in the impoverished region of North Africa, the Sahara, and the grasslands to the south known as the Sahel. The consensus was that this vast area has the potential for escalating violence.

It is no secret that much of the sophisticated military hardware sent to Libya to topple Muammar Gaddafi – including SAM ground-to-air missiles (MANPADS) and some of the most advanced artillery systems in Moscow's arsenal like the quad-barreled ZSU23/24 – have found their way into the hands of those exporting revolution to other African states.



Mercenary ‘Flying Column’ en route to Stanleyville in the north-east Congo at the height of the Simba rebellion. The relieving force which ended up saving hundreds of prisoners held by the rebels had little in the way of armour and were regularly ambushed. (Photo courtesy of Leif Hellström)



West Africa's sub-Saharan Sahel – or Somalia's arid regions (seen here) – have become fertile "feeding grounds" for a new generation of Jihadist "freedom fighters". Small groups of professional private military contractors could quickly put a stop to this trend if caught early enough. It has already been twice achieved by South African mercenaries in Sierra Leone and Angola; the precedents are already in place. (Photo: Author)

Meantime, the African Union (AU) is trying to do what it can to stem the tide, but its resources (and available cash as well as the ability to provide trained soldiers) are limited. For instance, the majority of African troops recently deployed in the Congo were either badly trained or almost totally unmotivated in the face of a crisis that resulted in tens of thousands of innocents being forced to flee. While the AU has done reasonably well in Somalia, its record elsewhere in Africa is dismal.

So too with the Central African Republic, where Gabon – its nearest neighbor – aware that the capital of one of its closest allies was about to be overrun by rebels – offered a meager 120 soldiers in support.

The bottom line is that in any counter-insurgency, it is essential to recognize the dangers of "incremental escalation." The historical lesson that has been learned empirically since World War II is that by "trailing" an insurgency the consequences typically condemn almost all counterinsurgency

efforts to failure. We've seen that happen in the Congo, Nigeria, Eritrea, Sudan and a host of other African states facing insurrection.

And, of course, in Afghanistan…

For all that, there is a feasible and accessible counter to some of the African military adventures currently being embarked on by a host of largely anti-Western guerrillas active in Africa today. These groups are a diverse lot, their methods as varied as their ethnic or national origins.

In Mali, for example, there are combatants from many countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Nigeria and even a few Afghans. Interestingly, there have been unconfirmed reports that several "volunteers" from Chechnya were spotted in rebel ranks. Their only common denominator is that all are devout followers of the Prophet.

Strategists on both sides of the Atlantic have consistently voiced the opinion that many of Africa's wars could (and should) be given short shrift with the use of helicopter gunships flown by freelance professionals. British military historian John Keegan told me before he died last year that it was a pity the West did not look more positively at the kind of potential that a well-equipped, motivated and trained mercenary force has to offer, particularly in Third World conflicts.

It was his view that helicopter gunships were the best means of stopping mindless and primitive carnage. He was also enthusiastic about the use of hired guns to counter some of these threats and made the point that people tended to forget General Charles Gordon [of Khartoum fame] served in the Middle East as a mercenary.

"Moreover, he did so both under the Chinese Emperor as well as under orders of the Khedive of Egypt," were Keegan's words

A more recent comment came from General Sir David Richards, Britain's recently retired Chief of Defence Staff who, in a personal note to this author, declared that the role of Neall Ellis, the South African helicopter gunship pilot who fought under his command in Sierra Leone, was exemplary. His words were succinct: "Neall Ellis is a great man. I and everyone in Sierra Leone owe him much."

The reason why General Sir David has been outspoken about the world's most famous mercenary aviator is because single-handedly, Ellis was able – over a period of several months – to keep the anti-Freetown rebels off

balance with the government's lone and antiquated Mi-24 helicopter gunship. He continued to do so until the British Army and Royal Navy were able to step in and bring that war to a close.

Financing a mercenary force is not cheap, but it hardly compares with the manner in which the United Nations has been able to squander resources in almost all the military operations with which the world body has been involved.

In Sierra Leone, the mercenary group Executive Outcomes was paid something like $30 million to force Revolutionary United Front rebels to the negotiating table, and they did so within about six or seven months of launching a vigorous military counter to the RUF terror campaign.

In contrast, the UN's budget for its first six months in this remote West African State – where their people were faced with exactly the same security problems as those encountered by the South African freebooters – exceeded a quarter billion dollars, or $1.5 million *a day*!



Most weapons used by guerrillas are of East European origin. That trend will continue because the weapons are relatively cheap, and are both available and reliable, such as this Dragunov sniping rifle in Somali hands. (Photo: Arthur Walker)

There was another significant anomaly. Executive Outcomes rarely had more than 100 men in the field, and at most, three operational helicopters. The UN contingent in Sierra Leone at one stage totaled 16,000 troops from 16 different countries…

Which raises the question: What does it cost to mount a helicopter strike force in Africa with modest support elements?

According to Neall Ellis, three or four Russian Mi-24s would be more than adequate in any strike role if deployed in the kind of insurgency now facing countries like the Central African Republic or Mali. Additionally a couple of Mi-17s would be needed for logistical back-up and troop-ferrying roles.

As Ellis suggests, there is hardly an African country without a medium or small helicopter wing. “These could be employed for the purpose and, if not

available, helicopters can be legally acquired by countries offering appropriate end-user certificates," he says.



Veteran South African combatant Roelf van Heerden has helped turn several revolutions around. Last heard, he was in the Congo on security duties. Before that he headed an anti-terror force in Puntland, Somalia, seen here. That was during a rescue mission when two dozen hostages were liberated from their captors after being held for three horrific years onboard a freighter. (Photo: Roelf van Heerden)

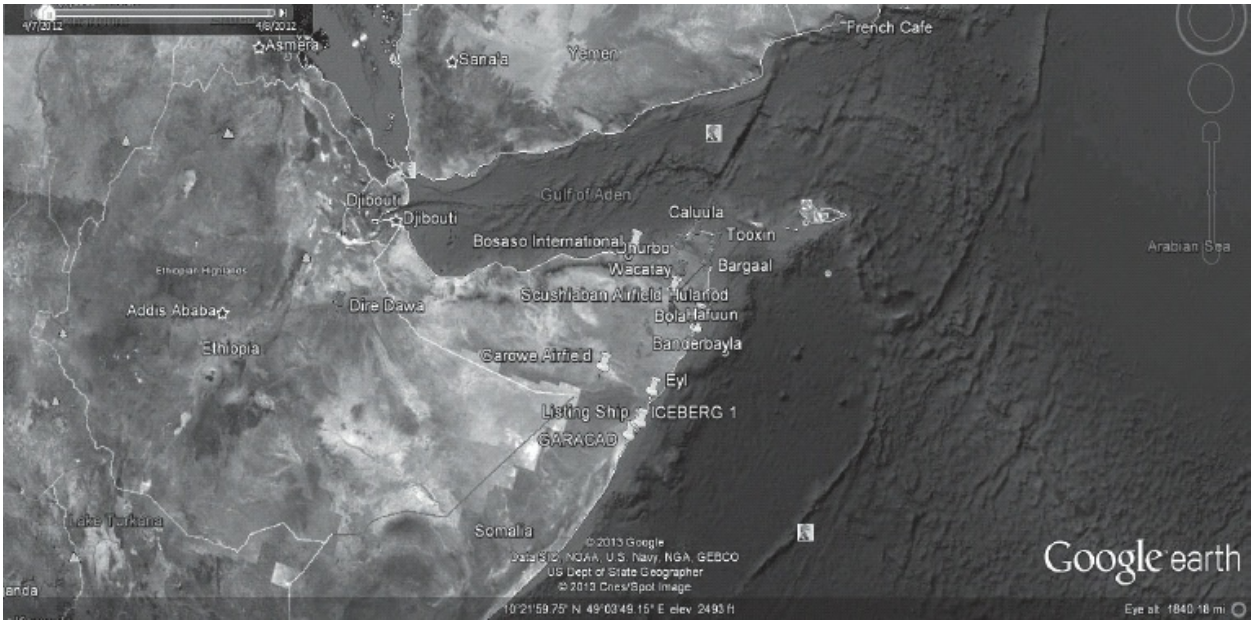
Without the proper papers though, he adds, "it is almost impossible to acquire such weapons."

Gunships – whatever their role – do not come cheap, especially since prices have escalated in recent years. Five or six years ago you could buy a used but serviceable Hip for about $6 million. Today, a top quality Russian Mi-8 – with a modicum of spares – is going to put the buyer back about $10 million. Currently, most come from the Ukraine. A fully serviceable Mi-24 (Hind) gunship sells for less, but the cost of spares – in all departments – can be crippling.

An additional outlay is aircrew. During the recent Mali insurgency, the word on the mercenary grapevine was that freelance gunship pilots were

being offered $1,500 a day, with co-pilots fractionally less. In Somalia, Neall Ellis, the lone pilot flying the Alouette III bought by Somalia's Puntland Police Maritime Force (PPMF) – currently countering pirates operating off the Horn of Africa – earns roughly the same as some of the better-paid American helicopter pilots in Afghanistan.

In the Horn of Africa Ellis works for a law enforcement agency and flies the single Alouette gunship on his own, with a gunner manning the machine's RPD automatic weapon on board.



Google Earth photo indicating the area of operations of Somali-based mercenary pilots in the north-east of that troubled country. The most effective efforts being made to counter these actions come from a part of Somalia that has declared itself independent from the Mogadishu government and calls itself Puntland. The Puntland Police Maritime Force – originally created with CIA support and funds – has its main base at Bosaso on Puntland's north coast. The location of the freighter Iceland 1, hijacked by Somali pirates and held with more than two dozen hostages for three years, can also be seen.

Ground crews are essential to maintain these aircraft, which can sometimes be a crippling expense for a poor African nation that faces an insurgency. In Somalia's case, Ellis's Alouette gunship is routinely flown to the United States for servicing.

While flying operationally in Sierra Leone, Ellis had the services of a bunch of Ethiopian technicians, many of them Russian- or American-trained. As he commented when I was flying with him in West Africa: "These fellows are real professionals, often going with us into combat situations to keep things ticking over." He reckons that a six-ship chopper wing would require

at least a dozen engineers to keep the helicopters airworthy.

Add to that travel costs, suitable Western-style accommodation and food as well as adequate, if improvised, medical back-up and costs are likely to increase markedly. Mercenary air wings rarely offer search and rescue facilities: if you happen to go down – which was the case in Sierra Leone – you are on your own.

Additionally, as with Executive Outcomes in both Angola and Sierra Leone, aircrews tend to make use of small fixed-wing planes for spotting or logistical purposes, especially if some of the "hot" areas lie some distance from the main base of operations.

A notable success involving "freelance aviators" more recently was the rescue of 22 sailors who had been held hostage by pirates on board the Panamanian-registered freighter *Iceberg* for three years off the coast of Somalia.

Several members of the crew had died during this period and others were savaged and tortured by their Somali tormentors. The *Iceberg's* chief engineer had had his ears cut off because he "did not listen", and they then crushed his leg with a steel bar "so that he could not escape."

Aware of the fate of these men, the government of Puntland, a semi-autonomous entity that had originally been part of greater Somalia (but which had decided to go it alone after the central government collapsed some years ago) tried to negotiate with the pirates. Each time, their entreaties to release the prisoners were rejected.

Finally, in December 2012, a small group of South African mercenaries in the employ of the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) attempted to rescue the prisoners. About 20 ground troops that included a Puntland detachment and were led by former Executive Outcomes veteran Rudolf van Heerden launched the attack. The effort was backed by a single Alouette III helicopter gunship with a Soviet-era PKM machinegun mounted at the port door, flying top cover.

Having brought some heavier weapons – including a Soviet 82 mm smoothbore B-10 recoilless gun as well as RPG-7s to bear – the onslaught ended 12 days later when the pirates, using mobile phones, called their leaders to negotiate a truce through diplomatic elements in the Yemen. The Puntland Government agreed to exchange the hostages for the freedom of the

pirates who were holding them.



Mercenary operations do not need sophisticated or advanced weapons systems to be effective. In Somalia, the Puntland Maritime Police Force bought a 40-year old Alouette helicopter gunship from a South African and for several years it was used to counter piracy in waters adjacent to the Red Sea. (Photo: Author's collection)



And when the money is available, there are excellent machines out there waiting for buyers, such as this Italian-built Agusta chopper gunship. These helicopters have been used to good effect in several African insurrections. (Photo: Author)

This was the first time an independent military group had rescued a group of hostages from captivity while still at sea.

This development has injected a deadlier threat into the scenario. With al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab forces having been driven out of their safe havens in Southern Somalia (as a consequence of military ground and action by African Union forces), Puntland is now experiencing a surge of Islamic-backed terrorism. Own sources indicate that there are now an estimated 300 al-Shabab guerrilla fighters in Puntland and that their ranks include a number of Egyptian jihadists.

Washington is aware of this development. Bancroft Global Development, a military training group funded by the United Nations and the American State Department and headquartered in Washington DC and Mogadishu, provided training in a range of military services, from bomb disposal and sniper training to kitting out of police. Following Bancroft’s withdrawal from

Puntland, the al-Shabab terror group has moved into this area adjoining the Red Sea. Meanwhile another American firm has been tasked to run security operations in Puntland and, indeed, the anti-pirate attack took place under its auspices.

The assets of the PMPF are modest. Prior to Bancroft pulling back to Mogadishu, a pair of upgraded Mi-17s were ordered, but these were put on hold and never delivered.

The force lacks the support of the original 120 expatriate combatants fielded by Bancroft until the group was disbanded last June following United Nations pressure. Involved then was former US Navy Seal Erik Prince, founder and owner of Blackwater International who had partnered up for the Puntland operation with Lafras Luitingh, a former South African Special Forces operative who had originally founded Executive Outcomes. About 20 private military contractors remain, all part of the PMPF air wing infrastructure.

Still at the unit's Bosaso air base, at a small town in the north of the country about 300 miles east of Djibouti, is an Antonov-26 with a rotating Russian crew. This aircraft is used for bringing in supplies, troop rotation as well as to drop fuel and equipment to PMPF elements on distant operations. This includes dropping 44-gallon drums of fuel at sea for the three Zodiac RHIBs, fast craft fitted with 400 hp Volvo twin-screw inboards and 12.7 mm DshKa heavy machine guns mounted on their prows and deployed for anti-piracy operations by the PFMF. Jet-A1 is also dropped by parachute for the Alouette helicopter when needed.

Additionally, the PMPF has at its headquarters base at Bosaso three new Ayres Turbo Thrush crop-spraying aircraft armed with four-barreled mini-guns capable of firing 4,000 rounds/minute as well as US-supplied underwing air-to-ground rockets.

Adapted for close air support roles and labeled "Vigilantes", the aircraft were originally developed for anti-narcotics crop-spraying roles in Columbia at the behest of the US Department of State. Clearly, the machines are a useful adjunct to the limited aerial capability of the PMPF.

Another aviation element routinely seen at the air base at Bosaso is a pair of military Mi-17s with upgraded 2,500 hp engines. No photographers are allowed near the place and the crews – one of the pilots is a woman – have no contact with those linked to the PMPF, except senior military officers within

the Puntland Government.

Interestingly, the two Mi-17s have been completely modified to include Western avionics, which, by some accounts, is a first for the Russian helicopter. Its original clamshell rear doors have been removed and a ramp installed, very much in line with what was originally sported by the French-built Super Frelon helicopter, in all probability to allow for the mounting of automatic weapons that can be fired out of the rear. The two Mi-17s use the same shooting range for training as the PMPF helicopter, lying a short distance from Bosaso.

It is significant that a major al-Shabab cell was recently uncovered near the town and that the base has come under attack at least once in recent months.

The presence in Puntland of increased numbers of al-Shabab fighters was underscored weeks ago when local residents reported an Arab dhow, purportedly out of the Yemen, that had entered one of the lagoons along the northern coast and unloaded a cargo. This contraband was hurriedly buried and the boat fled when curious locals started to approach.

In a search the following day that involved the unit's helicopter, as well as PMPF ground forces, a cache of arms was uncovered, but it was obvious that only part of the cargo had been unloaded. It consisted of 220 RPG-7 grenades but no launchers, 90 lb. of TNT, 200 electric detonators incorporating the latest technology, four rolls of cortex and 45 lb. of ammonium nitrate in sacks, which could have been mistaken for fertilizer.

Also found was a quantity of B-9 ammunition, but no barrels (the B-9 is of Soviet origin and slightly smaller than the B-10 recoilless gun) as well as boxes of AK and PKM ammunition and hand grenades.

In another development during 2012, an American private military company (PMC) offered its services to equip the Ugandan military with a moderate-sized helicopter strike force for deployment in its Somali-based security operations against the al-Qaeda-backed al-Shabab terror movement. This operation was not linked to the Puntland operation, but indirectly, would have worked on security issues in tandem.



In Africa – and much of the Third World – Russia's Mi-24 (Hind) gunship is still regarded as one of the most effective counter-insurgency weapons in the armoury of any defending nation. At roughly $6 million apiece for a serviceable model, they are comparatively cheap compared to Western gunships, are rugged, reliable and easily serviced. This one, flown by veteran mercenary aviator Neall Ellis, worked hard at countering rebel advances in Sierra Leone. (Photo: Author)

Zone 4 International, an Atlanta-based American company, submitted a proposal (below) to the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) for the lease/purchase of three Mi-24V (Hind) helicopters to support that country's AMISOM operations in Somalia. It included several options for an ACMI (aircraft, crew, maintenance, insurance) lease and aviation/mission-support services. The machines were delivered shortly afterwards.

The company declared that since Uganda was substantially contributing to the United Nations Somali security mission in the Horn of Africa, the intent was to offer the UPDF an "unmatched military capability" that could be presented to AMISOM/UN by the UDPF, the idea being to increase their mission effectiveness and reduce direct threat exposure to African Union (AU) ground forces in Somalia. That offer was subsequently accepted by the

United Nations.

The Mi-24V helicopters were to be configured in a multi-role capacity and used for strikes against al-Qaeda-linked enemy units, force protection, medical evacuation, troop transport, emergency airlift, aerial surveillance as well as intelligence gathering.

Zone 4 International also offered aviation and mission support services to include (but not limited to) the provision of highly experienced English-speaking crews, field maintenance and operational support. In addition, at the request of the UPDF, the company was willing to provide full mission support capabilities for the deployment and sustainment of the air group such as construction of a forward operating base (FOB), static and mobile force protection, and logistics solutions to ensure 24/7 mission readiness.

Mi-24V specifications:

Three crew, eight passengers (or four medevac stretchers)
Propulsion: 2 Turbo shaft Klimow TV3-117VM engines
Speed: 208 mph (181 knots)
Service ceiling: 14,760 ft.
Range: 300 miles
Empty weight: 18,390 lb. Maximum: 25,350 lb.

Available Armament (ordnance not included)

Yak B 12.7 mm –four-barreled nose gun (Gatling)
NSV 12.7 mm × 107 mm crew-served weapon
UB-32 launch pods for S-5, 57 mm unguided rockets
Optional avionics and equipment included GPS Garmin-155XL and ALFA-2031 night vision goggles (NVG)

The company stated that it had access to five Mi-24V helicopters, all under zero time overhaul, which could be operational within 90 days. The helicopters were all manufactured in 1986 and had never been deployed in combat. They had been inspected by staff and were deemed to be in excellent condition. Mission-ready, the machines could be delivered – subject to export/import requirements – within three months.

Concept of Operations

The company offer was in the nature of a self-sustaining concept of operations (COO), which included the following:

- Mobilization
- Deployment to theater
- Operations management and control while in-theater
- Sustainment while in-theater
- Handover of asset ownership

Technical Offer

Operating roles included, but not limited to, day and night air operations available 24 hours a day and seven days a week for the insertion/extraction of AMISOM troops, passenger flights, cargo transport, on-call aero medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), search and rescue, and reconnaissance flights.

Fixed Wing

1 CASA 212 multi-purpose and reconnaissance aircraft.

ACMI Lease of CASA 212 aircraft equipped with forward-looking infrared camera and night vision optics. The primary mission role: to offer forward observation capability aircraft and personnel on encroaching hostile threats.

Additional mission roles at the request of AMISOM would include, but not limited to:

- Forward observation and aerial intelligence-gathering for AMISOM forces
- Medevac
- Troop and cargo movements
- Aerial drop operations

Crews:

The company would hand-select experienced English-speaking crews with the pilots-in-command (PIC) having a minimum of 500 rotary flight hours, four sets of pilots, weapons systems officers and three flight engineers for each Mi-24V. Crews would be vetted by Zone 4 International and undergo refresher flight training and ground operations

training prior to deployment to Somalia. Additionally, crews would attend high-risk advanced operator training at the company's Tactical Training Centre in Serbia. Training would include medic life-saving courses, tactical pistol, and escape and evasion training.

Proposed Crew Requirements for Mi-24Vs: four pilots, four weapons systems officers, three flight engineer/medics, two ground engineers: Total operational complement 13.

Maintenance and Spare Parts,

The Mi-24Vs were finally delivered to Entebbe Airport in Uganda with combat stores that included spare parts and tooling equipment. This included TV3-117 spare engines, one set of main and tail rotor blades, parts, petroleum oils lubricants, and avionics. Maintenance conducted on-station was to include (if required):

- Daily service check
- 300 hour check
- 500 hour check
- Engine/APU change
- Minor maintenance
- Airframe patchworks

Insurance

All aircraft were registered to carry hull, third party liability, war risk and crew insurance.

Operations Staff – Forward

Zone 4 offered to appoint a program manager (PM) experienced in military helicopter operations in areas of high risk. This position would be an on-site post and have direct oversight of the operation and assets. In addition, the PM would act as liaison between the UDPF and AMISOM forces and have a full understanding of the AMISOM mission and the Rules of Engagement (ROE). An operations specialist with strong military experience would back him.

Operations Staff Rear

Administrative and logistics coordination support would be conducted by

the company offices located in Nairobi, Kenya, and Atlanta, Georgia.

Operational Base

The main operational base was to have been constructed at specific coordinates adjacent to Mogadishu Airport.

This field HQ would be built on hard earth with a 1,300 × 33 yard airstrip suitable for rotary and fixed wing aircraft with an aircraft parking enclave 77 × 77 yards located at [deleted]. This operating base would be able to accommodate up to 30 persons to include prefabricated housing units, potable water, plumbing, electricity, environmental control units, dining facility, washroom, apron lighting stands, expeditionary runway lighting system, up to 1,000 yard earth perimeter (in wire mesh containers) and watchtowers with illuminating spotlights.

Cost:

The price for one Mi-24V flight hour was listed as US$7,500 while a single CASA 212 flight hour was quoted at $2,000.

Minimal monthly guaranteed hours (MGH) and contract period

The minimal guaranteed hours per Mi-24V helicopter was set at 50 flight hours each. For the CASA 212 the stipulation was set at 60 hours, all aviation assets with contract periods of 24 months.

Monthly Payment for a CMI Lease Purchase of three Mi-24Vs

Item MGH Rate per Flight Hour Total Cost (three helicopters) Mi-24V:

- 50 flight hours × $7,500 = $375,500: TOTAL $1,125,000
- Monthly Payment for CMI Lease of the CASA 212: $120,000

Total monthly payment for aviation services $1,245,000

24-month cost of aviation/long-term transport services $29,880,000
Aviation operating base stand-up cost: $2 million

Total program cost for 24 months: $31,880,000

NOTE: The Uganda Government did not avail itself of Zone 4 International's personnel offer, maintaining that it preferred to use its own aircrews. The result was that all three Mi-24s crashed in Kenya while in transit to Mogadishu in 2012.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PROFILE OF A MERCENARY: GUNSHIP ACE NEALL ELLIS

Gunship Ace Neall Ellis – Nellis to his buddies – is not only an outstanding helicopter combat pilot but also a very good friend.

I went on operations with him in Angola many times during South Africa's so-called "Border War" period and thereafter, while he fought to turn around the rebels in Sierra Leone. In both ventures he was successful, so much so that in an exchange of letters in 2010, General Sir David Richards, then Chief of the General Staff and thereafter Chief of the Defence Staff in Great Britain, wrote: "Neall Ellis is a great man; I and everyone in Sierra Leone owe him much."

That was the first time in recent history that the serving head of a Western defense establishment had paid tribute to the role of a mercenary pilot in wartime.

There are many others who look up to Ellis, as leader – often under extremely difficult conditions such as were encountered in Afghanistan in recent years – as a friend and as a confident.

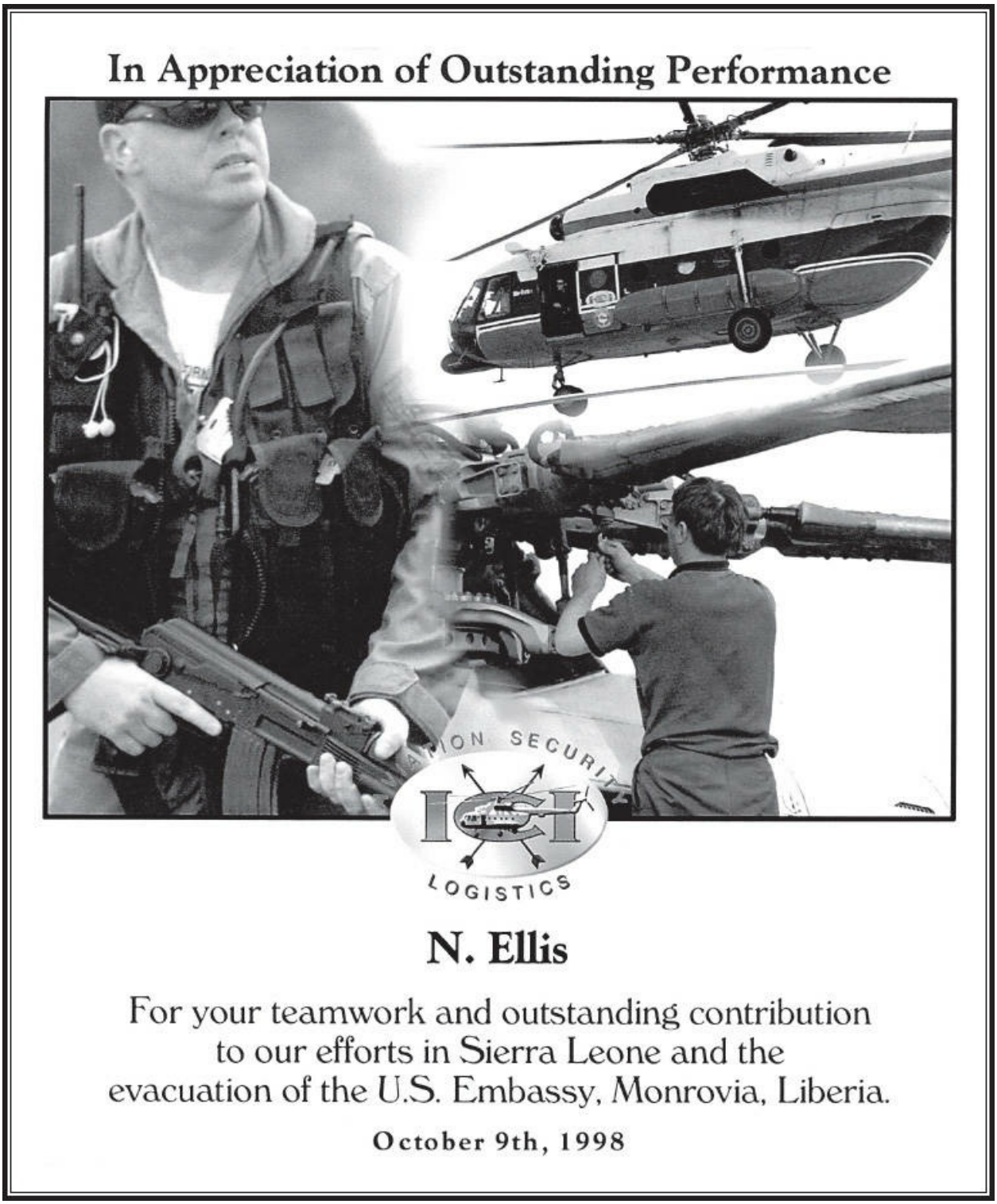
Gunship Ace is Neall's biography that I wrote while he was still flying in Afghanistan. He has since moved on to flying gunships in Somalia.

Mike Foster, one of his co-pilots, penned the following while flying alongside him after take-off from Kabul in summer 2011. The chopper, a Russian-built Hip registered ZS-RIX, was on its way to Khowst Salerno, a remote military outpost that routinely comes under attack.

"He's a tough bugger, this Nellis guy, still flying helicopter support missions in his 61st year and there is no talk of retirement, and that's roughly forty years of action in a dozen or more wars. Curiously, he has never been wounded, not even a scratch. Nellis says he can't stop now because he's got

to put bread on the table… too many people depend on him.

"A peculiar, likeable fellow, Neall has become something of a legend in his time. He's a father, a military man to his fingertips, a totally unforgiving mercenary fighter when placed in an uncompromising situation and, to his mates, honest to the point of being exploited by those less fortunate than he might be. And he's sensitive to the problems of others, though he's got a bunch of his own.



After a major hostage extraction effort in Liberia involving Neall Ellis's "Bokkie" – his often shot-at and battered Mi-17 that helped evacuate people from the rebels – the South African aviator was appropriately acknowledged by the United States State Department. This was one of many unsung efforts by "Nellis" to bring a measure of stability to an extremely volatile region, not something normally accorded to a so-called mercenary.

“He can be stubborn, interesting and occasionally infuriating, especially if things involving the machines he flies haven’t been done his way. He refers to it as ‘survival, straight and simple.’ Then he’ll add: ‘Just do it right and we won’t have problems when we least expect them,’ which has been his credo throughout his career.

“These are all qualities that are typical of the Neall Ellis that I have got to know over the last two or three years.

“He is physically short, perhaps a bit stocky, but as confident as hell, with a discerning personality and force of character that reflects good leadership. He had probably acquired all that by the time he made colonel in the South African Air Force almost a quarter of century ago.

“Neall Ellis has quite a few other accolades, which he won’t talk about, including being involved with the British Army and the Royal Navy in the jungle war against the rebels in Sierra Leone. This was the first time in recent history that the British Armed Forces worked hand-in-glove with an acknowledged soldier of fortune. Before that, he was involved with Sandline’s Colonel Tim Spicer, who apparently has a high regard for him. There are others, but he’s non-committal about them when asked.

“Neall also has the gift of being a good listener. There has never been a time when he hasn’t made me feel comfortable, even when he has been really busy and I have interrupted him or intruded on valuable time, of which he doesn’t have much because he’s often still at his desk at 10 o’clock at night working on the next day’s flying schedules.

“Though he runs a unit involving dozens of pilots in Afghanistan, he always makes you welcome and gives you his undivided attention. What more can I say?

“Neall was in the SAAF with me, but I never had much to do with him then as he was a lot senior to me. I only really got to know him after we’d been deployed to Kabul. Afghanistan – as we both found – is a land of contrast, harsh but pure, arid but green, sweltering heat contrasting with high altitude tables of snow, that’s how we pilots all see it. That is also where I really got to understand the man.

“Roughly the size of Texas, Afghanistan has very few major roads. The ones that are there are being increasingly monitored and mined by the Taliban. These actions have forced Coalition Forces to rely more on helicopters to move troops and supplies. Indeed, many remote military bases

and outposts – particularly in the mountains – can sometimes be reached only by chopper.

“We arrived with the first group of South African Mi-8 helicopter pilots in Afghanistan and Neall approached this vast new Central Asian country with discernible eagerness. It was quite a hop; from flying Mi-24 helicopter gunships to being at the controls of slow and meandering Mi-8s.

“I reckon that it was hard for him to get accustomed to because the Hip is hardly an offensive weapon in this kind of environment.

“He changed his style of flying as well. These days he takes more of a defensive approach with the Hip – mostly high flying and none of the low-level aggressive stuff he was used to in Africa and elsewhere, including the Balkans where he flew choppers for a Muslim in Bosnia. You can’t help sensing that it is perhaps a little boring for him.



While flying support missions in Afghanistan as a private military contractor, Neall Ellis constantly played ball with US Forces, their helicopters often using the same remote landing pads. (Photo: Neall Ellis)

“This has come to the fore several times in recent months: an example being the day we were flying along the western fringes of the Hindu Kush when Nellis leaned forward with a curious look on his face. He tugged at the side of his helmet and turned that side of his head towards the window. With an elated grin he happily exclaimed that we were being shot at.

“Quietly, and without fuss, he pulled his helmet straight again, leaned back in his seat and, with a look of contented nostalgia, continued with whatever he had been doing moments before.

“Flying with Neall has its advantages. On long flights he insists that there has to be a break in the middle. And that means stopping at a DFAC, usually on the turnabout point. It also means great food and goodies to enjoy. Fantastic! It does a lot for crew camaraderie and is always something to look forward to.

“I also enjoy going to Kabul with him too. If he wants something he buys it, simple as that. In Afghanistan the art of bargaining is something ingrained in the local psyche from birth.

“The old story runs along the lines of dividing by two whatever they first ask you to pay but Nellis doesn’t have the time for that kind of nonsense. He just hands over the money and doesn’t argue. He reckons that ‘if you want it, buy it, don’t dally around.’ It’s basically the way the man runs his life… he has a job to do and he gets on with it.



In the Sierra Leone troubles, Neall Ellis had a major impact on the war effort against the rebels. Focal point was Freetown, the capital and he often flew over the city to engender confidence. Pictured right, Neall Ellis. (Photos: Author)

"An efficient combatant when the occasion demands, had he not beaten the rebels back from the gates of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone – both times flying alone in an antiquated Mi-24 and at night – our governments' representatives would today be sharing space with some of Foday Sankoh's barbarians at the United Nations and other world bodies."

These days Neall Ellis's office is in Puntland, a part of Somalia that has declared itself independent from the Mogadishu government further south.

Like the rest of the country, this is a semi-desert region with few roads, a couple of landing strips that the locals refer to as "airports" (with air traffic control or fire control in the event of an accident) and very little else. His permanent base is at a town called Bosaso and he admits that he needs a

bodyguard of six soldiers armed with AKs to go anywhere near the place.

Arthur Walker, who preceded Ellis as Puntland's single chopper pilot (they each flew a lone 40-year old French-built Alouette gunship that had formerly seen action in Angola) admitted that there was an al-Qaeda base about six or eight miles from his headquarters.



"Everybody knew it was there but nobody was prepared to do anything about taking the place out," he declared.

Following the American-led UN "Operation Restore Hope" of the early 1990s, Somalia remained quietly under the radar for a few years.

Then Washington became aware that some of the bombers that destroyed two American Embassies in Nairobi and Kenya had powerful Somali connections. Al-Qaeda has since moved into the Horn of Africa in considerable force.

Nellis admits that Africa's Horn – as some pundits call it – has been variously described as "ungovernable" or "incapable of being controlled by anybody."

He acknowledges too that huge swathes of Somalia are run by a bunch of zealots that make Iran's mullahs look quite civilized by comparison. In the contemporary argot, they've been labeled "the original Jihadists." One and all, the people involved are committed religious zealots and, to a man – because women are not allowed within their ranks – they regard themselves in the service of Allah.

If you want to know what Somalia is like today, Mark Bowan's book *Black Hawk Down* presents the most accurate picture of the country as it was in 1993. Since then, conditions have deteriorated still further and as anybody who has been there recently will affirm, shooting can start anywhere, and at anytime.

Somalis – or "Skinnies" as some of us who spent time in Somalia would deprecatingly refer to them – were never first in line in any kind of bravery stakes. Most would wait until dark before attempting to harm you. Face-to-face confrontations were usually limited to when there was a crowd of them and perhaps a handful of us.

What already started to emerge in 1990s was that US Administration officials began to believe that Africa had become a potential breeding ground for terrorism. Indeed, by the start of the New Millennium, Washington was aware that Africa had already become both an important staging area and a region that was ideal for training international terrorists, a much favored place to target United States interests.

These days Neall Ellis spends most of flying time looking for pirates. When he finds them off the Puntland coast – as he did with five Arab dhows – he contacts the authorities at Bosaso for enough support to force them ashore at the nearest harbor.

"Do you ever get shot at during the performance of these duties?" I asked him when he visited me in England. It was his first break in six months and he needed it.

His reply was succinct, but it came with a smile: “Don’t ask me silly questions, Al…”

CHAPTER TWENTY

FREELANCE PILOTS FLY CHOPPER SUPPORT MISSIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

"I had more 'near misses' in my first six months of flying Russian Mi-8 helicopters in Afghanistan than in 36 years of doing my thing anywhere else in the world."

Neall Ellis, after his first deployment as a private military contractor in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan is different to any other fought by the West in the past century-and-a-half. It is a clash of cultures and ideologies that almost defies description.

In almost all respects, what is going on in Afghanistan today is a totally different military scenario to what took place in Iraq, Vietnam, Korea, World War II and a hundred or more insurgencies in Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the Middle East as well as the western Pacific. As one wag who had been there recently commented, there are parts of the country still furiously galloping into the 14th Century…

The youthful Winston Churchill once commented that Afghanistan was a land that almost invited conflict. Yet, once embroiled, he warned, it was a devilish task to disengage. Exactly the same situation holds for that country in the second decade of the New Millennium.

More recently, Neall Ellis, a veteran of a dozen wars that have included hostilities in Rhodesia, former South West Africa (Namibia today), Angola, the Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa – as well as the Balkans

(where he flew for Muslim militants battling the Serbs) – has been flying support missions in Russian-built helicopters in Afghanistan. He admits that working in this troubled, fragmented land has been different to anything else he has experienced. And while he concedes that it has not all been "uphill," there have been moments when he would rather have been elsewhere.

Based at Kabul International Airport on the outskirts of the Afghan capital, former South African Air Force Colonel Ellis was linked to a major private aviation company on contract to USAID. At one stage there were more than 50 pilots flying for the firm in Afghanistan.

Neall Ellis takes up the story:

So far I've had only one in-flight engine failure while flying in Southern Afghanistan. That happened fairly close to the Pakistani frontier, and I suppose it was to be expected that it would be a hairy experience. More than hairy, actually.

The terrain we were traversing at the time was inhospitable: there were valleys and jagged gorges just about everywhere with very little flat country in-between that might have allowed us to put down in an emergency. Also, you didn't know which areas were hostile and which were not. Anyway, as we'd been briefed often enough, nobody goes into these areas totally "blind."

We had our first warning of impending problems just as we crossed a ridge of a bit more than 10,000 feet. As expected, the mountains were almost sheer and from a cursory inspection of the terrain I could see there was nothing that even vaguely resembled a suitable landing place, which is another reason why I choose to fly over the rougher areas. My take on the war is that the insurgents usually prefer to operate in more inhabited areas, which are usually coupled to less-formidable mountain trails.

But the MTV is a very powerful helicopter, and its single-engine performance again proved phenomenal. So with all the weight on board, we were able to stabilize single-engine level flight at 8,000 feet, all the while maintaining a healthy clearance between us and the ground. We were well aware that that specific valley was under strong Taliban control.

We established afterwards that the cause of our engine malfunction was the failure of certain moving parts in the FCU, the Fuel Control Unit. With time, it had disintegrated into small particles, which basically became iron filings. These, in turn, ended up blocking the helicopter's fuel filters and

caused fuel starvation. Had it affected both engines at the same time, we'd have gone down.

By the time we realized what was going on, we'd lost power to the point where the malfunctioning engine suddenly became totally useless. And because we were unsure of the cause, we decided to shut it down anyway and continue with our remaining good engine. That way we prevented further damage to the damaged one.

We eventually managed to touch down at Asadabad and by radio, requested a new FCU. Once the replacement arrived and had been installed by our flight engineer, we were able to fly back to Kabul.

Interestingly, the Russians specially developed their Mi-8 MTV helicopters fitted with TB3-117 VM engines for operations in Afghanistan. Arguably it is still the best rotor-wing aircraft in the world in its weight/class for operations at altitude, often in unusually rugged conditions. Indeed, no Western helicopter in the same weight category can perform as well.



Afghanistan – dangerous, unpredictable in all weathers and often treacherous – was Neall Ellis uneven playing field for three hard years. During that time he lost eight members of his team in a single suicide car bomb attack on the outskirts of Kabul. (Photo: Neall Ellis)

There are still a few of the older Mi-8T models about with antiquated TBV2-117 engines, but during the summer months, their performance is drastically curtailed: on hot days, performance might be limited to a meager half-a-ton of freight, even when not carrying a full load of fuel.

I have watched some of these machines take off at Qalat, a small posting at an elevation of 5,200 feet some 80 miles to the north of Kandahar. It's the kind of place that at altitude in summer, the ambient temperature quickly heads towards the middle to late-30s and at times over 40 deg. Centigrade. There were a few times when I caught my breath just waiting for an accident to happen on take-off with these machines. The pilot would pull power, the coning angle on the rotors would become acute – drastically so – and one could literally hear the engine revs being pushed to the limit in a bid to prevent main rotor droop.

Gradually the pilot would ease his chopper over the ground – a couple of feet at a time – until he reached the edge of the LZ. Then he'd push the chopper down the crest to gain speed.

With Afghanistan in an escalating state of war, the Taliban will do what they can to bring down a helicopter, or even a fixed-wing plane. More often not, the Mi-8s tend to live up to the demands made on them.

But then, as happens so often in wartime, one tactic is usually superseded by another. The rebels have recently started taking up positions in the foothills to the east of Kabul and just wait for the opportunity to shoot down an aircraft. Already in July 2010, several fusillades of RPG rockets as well as small arms fire were directed at a civilian aircraft heading in on finals for the runway. Fortunately the shooting was poor and they missed, but even the pilot conceded that he was lucky.

As the Taliban increases its strength – and there is no shortage of either new recruits or adequate war matériel to stoke the ongoing conflict – they have become even more daring in their efforts. The possibility of an aircraft being shot down is now only a question of time.

Which raises the specter of what is likely to happen once the rebels obtain Manpads or SAMs. Should that happen, the game will radically change and everyone will have to adapt their flying techniques to counter this

development.

It is worth mentioning that recent news reports suggested not only that the rebels have ground-to-air missiles, but that they have been used against Allied aircraft. A heat-seeking missile brought down a NATO transport helicopter in 2007 killing five American troops as well as a British and a Canadian[2]. The US-built Chinook was hit shortly after taking off near the Helmand River, striking the aircraft in its left engine. The report from May 2007 stated that its impact "projected the aft-end of the helicopter upwards as it burst into flame, followed immediately by a nose dive into the ground in which there were no survivors."

There has been little follow-up on that development and one can hope it will not happen again, if only because the civilian version of the Mi-8 is not equipped either with exhaust suppressors or flare dispensing systems to counter missile lock-on. The helicopter's exhaust is substantial and would obviously attract any infra-red (IR) seeking missile, which makes it particularly vulnerable to ground-to-air missiles. Additionally, some of the new generation SAMs are contrast trackers, so even IR suppression equipment such as exhaust protection or low infra-red reflective paint would not be all that helpful.

Nor is this something new. It is on record that the Americans gave the mujahedeen rebels their first hand-held Stinger missiles. They also taught the opposition how to use them, which they eventually did with aplomb, bringing down hundreds of helicopters and jets during the course of a war that ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the Soviet invasion, the rebels used every opportunity to fire at aircraft – both fixed-wing and helicopters – and almost always from hill and mountaintops. These attacks are customarily referred to as "nomadic ambushes" and US Army Colonel Lester Grau deals with them in some considerable detail in Chapter 5 of his book *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*[1].

I have my own take on missiles. Though the newspapers did report the presence of the Taliban using SAMs, there was no concrete evidence that they might have used them against aircraft. To my knowledge, the helicopters hit, had been shot down with the Taliban using RPGs. We fly high – 1,500 feet above ground level – with the confidence that the mujahedeen do not have SAMs.

All that will change once we have concrete evidence that they have acquired ground-to-air missiles. Then we will have to change tactics and fly as low as possible… and that does put us in the small arms threat zone.

What quickly becomes clear to those who are familiar with Afghanistan's recent history – or have visited the country in the past few years – is that today's Afghan guerrillas have now adapted many of the tactics originally employed by the Taliban against Soviet forces in the 1980s. There are numerous instances of rebels targeting civilian aircraft. More recently, a chopper belonging to one of the private security groups took a lot of fire while flying down a valley in the Khost area, a strongly contested region adjacent to Pakistan's northern frontier districts.

Because of the mountains, the pilot was not able to take a direct route to his destination: ideally, he should have crossed a series of ridges, but these were too high for his machine. Consequently, he had no option but to fly a circuitous route below the peaks, a flight path that took him through several valleys that had seen recent action.



Peter “Monster” Wilkins, operations manager of Durban’s Starlite Choppers, has flown in Afghan air space several times in recent years. The insert shows the kind of accommodation offered to some air crews at Kabul Airport. (Photos: Peter Wilkins)

One of the areas he traversed was just below a mountaintop peak, where he had to fly barely 300 feet from the granite face in order to break through into a valley below. Clearly the Taliban had seen this happen before and they used these diversionary tactics to good advantage. In the process, the helicopter was not only holed several times, but one of its passengers was wounded.

The consensus among a number of pilots operating in Afghanistan today is that given the opportunity, the Taliban are not only capable, but have the ability to muster their forces in a short space of time, especially where aircraft are involved.

That’s exactly why I insist on flying the more direct routes over the hills… but obviously, I vary my track by a couple of miles whenever I use the route.

Most of the other pilots, the military included, tend to use the same flight paths when they enter the region and it is to be expected that some of them end up being blasted.

So it wasn’t all that surprising that shortly after first arriving in Central Asia, one of the pilots accused me of being reckless for avoiding established routes. A couple of days later he came back after a flight and said he had been shot at when he had followed a route through the mountains that I’d always made an effort to avoid. What every pilot knows is that if a helicopter is flying low over an area with an insurgent presence, the Taliban will use every opportunity to shoot it down.

Just after I first arrived here, while returning to Kabul from Sharana, we were flying about 1,000 feet above the ground over a village when I heard the distinctive sounds of rounds passing too pretty damn close for comfort… that same old “rat-tat-tat typewriter noise” of old. The firing lasted for less than 10 seconds, but it definitely got the adrenalin going and was quite an experience after all these years. All the shots missed and we suffered no damage, but then it is not easy to hit a moving target, especially at any kind of altitude.

All these experiences are among a slew of problems that our crowd recently experienced in Afghanistan and part of the problem is that there is precious little sharing of essential operational information within the in-

country aviation fraternity. The truth is that the military gives away absolutely nothing. If one of the civilian helicopters encounters a problem, there is no central organization to effectively disseminate the problems or the dangers involved, even if it is of critical significance. It is of little concern to those higher up that by withholding such intelligence, lives might be lost in the process. It'll obviously filter down eventually, but there is no hurry.

For example, if a helicopter is shot at from a specific location, the other operators often hear nothing about the incident for a while… more often than not a helicopter from another company will fly to the same location, and because the pilot has had no prior warning of what he may encounter along the way, he is also targeted.

Even getting to Afghanistan that first memorable occasion was an experience. My first view of the country, as the sun lifted above the horizon, was in a Pamir Airbus-320 from an altitude of 30,000 feet.

En route to Kabul, there were many aircraft passing below us, and the terrain was almost brutally mountainous. My initial impressions were that the terrain below looked dry and inhospitable and that there was no way that I would have liked to end up on the ground in those "hills" and have to walk my way back to safety. I settled back in my seat and recollected events that taken place over the previous few weeks.

While still in South Africa, I had been contracted to fly a Russian support helicopter, the Titan Mi-8 MTV, for an American-based company. We would be operating out of Kabul International Airport and tasked to fly missions in support of a government agency, USAID.

The helicopter had originally been loaded at Cape Town into an Ilyushin-76 aircraft for transport to Kabul. Prior to that, we'd looked at several other options, including actually flying the helicopter from South Africa to Afghanistan via Pakistan, a journey that would have taken ten days if there were no hold-ups. The decision was finally made to take her in by air, with a team of technicians in place by the time the helicopter arrived at Kabul. They would assemble it in time for the pilots' arrival.

One of my immediate notions of Afghanistan was that there was very little water once you left the lowlands. There are obviously rivers in the foothills and in winter there would be snow, but should an aircrew be unexpectedly brought down, either by enemy action or mechanical failure, escape and evasion from the enemy would be a serious matter. Getting water in the

mountains, in the summer especially, would be hugely problematical.

Our final approach into Kabul was uneventful. From the air, the city presented a picture like nothing I had ever seen before, the proverbial dust bowl that stretched all the way to the horizon.

As we descended, it seemed that a grim cauldron of grime surrounded the city. Visibility deteriorated the lower we descended and just about everything reflected an unending monochrome of dusty brown. You got the impression that there were very few trees and certainly no great green grass expanses such as one finds in other parts of the country. In fact, there was very little cultivation within sight of the city.

It was no different once we stepped out of the aircraft. Even though it was still early morning, the dry heat all but sucked the air out of my lungs. I was immediately reminded of time spent in Iraq, where I had experienced the same sensation on leaving air-conditioned buildings and going outside.

Once on the ground at Kabul, I was met by our local facilitator and after money changed hands, we headed out to my new home in Qalah Fatullah.

After settling into basic but clean and comfortable accommodation, I had a few moments to contemplate the next two months in the ’stan, my basic period of contract. Crew rotations in Afghanistan can vary from 12 weeks in-country and a month out, to six weeks in-country and six out.

Pay scales for aircraft commanders range from $300 per day for non-US contract pilots and up to $1,000 per day for the US-contracted companies. Co-pilots on multi-crewed helicopters earn anything between $300 and $500 a day, while flight engineers can get as much as $500 a day. Russian crews tended to be paid less than their Western counterparts, in part because there was a surfeit of them looking for this kind of work.

It didn’t take long before I was introduced to the many of the fixed-wing pilots: almost all of them South African and flying Beech 1900s or KingAir-200s.

The following day merged into a haze of briefings, signing Red Tag notices, NOTAMs and other Special Operations Procedures related to flying operations in Afghanistan. That was followed by briefings on the use of the various tracking devices that we take with us in the aircraft. We were given standard clothing to wear for flying: Levi’s 511 khaki trousers and Task Force khaki shirts. Because the operation is very low key in terms of military

support, we do not even wear flying overalls.

Notably, we were issued with ballistic jackets, the idea being to wear them while flying. I prefer not to use them, in part because of a fellow pilot from the Rhodesian War who was forced down by ground fire and died because he had been wearing one. He wasn't killed by enemy fire, but by the ballistic jacket that shattered his throat when his torso was thrown forward on impact. In fact, throughout my operational flying, I have never donned a ballistic jacket and my reasoning is basic.

Over many years of piloting helicopters in combat, my machines have taken numerous hits. Usually they would strike the helicopter from the sides or from below. But there is no protection on either side of a ballistic jacket …

Nor was it lost on me that the helicopter we used in Afghanistan did not have the protection of any ballistic panels. Consequently, had we taken a hit, there would not have been much that we could have done about it.

My personal philosophy about combat flying in choppers is simple: A pilot placed in that situation needs to fly profiles that do not put him in danger. For start, he needs to keep his speed high for as long as possible. If he is shot at, he should avoid evasive maneuvers. Such flying tends to rapidly bleed off speed and it is axiomatic than a slow moving target presents the enemy with an easier target than a relatively fast one.



Various American government agencies, including the US State Department, are involved in ongoing operations in Afghanistan. Many of their air crews are guarded by private military contractors. (Photo: Neall Ellis)

And while I don't wear a ballistic jacket, my survival vest is altogether another matter. As far as I am concerned, the vest is one of the most important pieces of equipment any pilot working in a threat environment should wear.

The reasons for doing so are simple: if the helicopter is forced down either because of engine failure or ground fire, the only equipment a pilot might be left with to survive is what he has on his body.

It is pointless to keep survival equipment stowed in the back of the aircraft. Once the aircraft has impacted and starts to burn, or if you go down as a consequence of enemy ground fire, it may be difficult – impossible even – to try to recover anything from the back of the aircraft, especially when there are bullets flying. There have been many cases of downed aviators ending up on the ground in unwanted circumstances, and all they have in their possession is what they had in their pockets.

I carry standard stuff like a hand-held GPS and a VHF air-band radio, a signaling mirror, whistle, a "Day-Glo" panel or two, a torch, knives, a fold-up

water bottle as well as a small medical pack. To me, an essential item in this kit is a supply of anti-inflammatory painkillers. Should I have to start running in the hills on an escape and evasion venture, painkillers will allow me to carry on well beyond my accepted physical limits.

It is common knowledge that the approach to landing and the brief period that follows lift-off are the two most dangerous phases of flight in Afghanistan. The Taliban often take up positions close to some of the military bases to wait for helicopters to come in to land, their most favored weapon for this purpose still the tried and trusted RPG-7. With a range of 1,000 yards before self-destructing, it can do a lot of damage to a machine if it strikes in the right place, though small arms weapons such as the AK and the PKM are also extensively deployed among the guerrillas.

I am a fierce critic of Russian flying techniques when it comes to take-off and landing in remote areas, and in Afghanistan there are a lot of both.

The most widely used technique after take-off from an LZ among many of these aviators is to select a relatively steep climbing angle at the best rate of climb speed of 80 miles/hour. Granted, the climb-rate is relatively high, but these pilots refuse to accept that in choosing this option, they become a relatively slow moving target for somebody with an automatic weapon.

Similarly, their technique for landing is to approach an LZ with a steep descending angle at a low speed, barely a fraction above transition. The few times I have flown with the Russian crews, either as a co-pilot or as a passenger, I become acutely aware that we have made ourselves into an excellent target for anyone with an RPG, or even an assault rifle.

There have been numerous civilian Russian helicopters shot down in Afghanistan, and most of them were downed either in the final stages of the approach to landing and on a few occasions, just after take-off.

In South African Air Force operational flying training courses, we learned that speed was always the best way to counter incoming fire. The technique was to fly as low as possible after take-off in order to allow the speed to build up before initiating a climb if required. On any landing approach in a hostile area, it is essential to come in as fast as is safely possible before touchdown. The idea is to present a difficult flight path to anybody on the ground intent on causing damage: you need to prevent him from determining a tracking solution which will allow his rounds to enter any airspace at the same time you do.

This is not an easy option if the helicopter is moving swiftly, but if the speed of the aircraft is limited, or almost in the hover, the tracking solution becomes a simple matter and the machine will take a hit.

Our first flights after deployment in Afghanistan were carried out always with one of the experienced helicopter co-pilots accompanying us in the cockpit.

These people were familiar with the area as well as the procedures for approaching and landing at the various USAID Provincial Reconstruction Team bases (PRTs) scattered around the country.

Some of them are co-located with NATO Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and because of heavy artillery in some of the locations, we needed to know the correct frequencies as well as approach paths in order to not enter one of the firing lanes while approaching an LZ. Several times we got frantic radio calls from operational personnel warning us off from our approach. Then we'd orbit in a safe position away from the base until the artillery had completed their fire plan.

This was not an ideal situation: orbiting for any length of time in some of the Afghanistan hot spots often results in the Taliban firing on slow moving aircraft. Also, flying in circles over an area gives those hostile elements on the ground plenty of practice. You might miss an orbiting helicopter ten times in a row if it hangs around long enough, but eventually you are going to score a hit.

We sometimes had the additional problem in some of these operational areas with communications between ground forces and aircraft. They were often badly coordinated, or rather, uncoordinated. We'd come into a base and on short finals there would be a huge explosion from an adjacent artillery position as a round or two was fired.

Most of the areas where we go in have cement landing pads, with large stones scattered around the LZ, the idea being to prevent dust being scattered while the helicopter is operational either in or out, in itself a hazard should the pilot lose visual contact with the ground.

Very few Afghan bases have runways along which wheeled helicopters might make a rolling start to get airborne. This technique makes for less use of power as we go through transition to get off the ground. Once through that initial transition, we are able to get airborne with larger or heavier loads and the helicopter can accelerate safely to cruise at speed.

The ground war in Afghanistan is not the only hostile environment There is a lot going on above ground level as well and that threat does not primarily come from Taliban surface-to-air missiles or ground fire, but from a very real potential for collision with other aircraft, both fixed- and rotor-wing.

The truth is that some Eastern European pilots do not only speak bad English; they barely understand the language. Most are either Russian or Ukrainian and the majority are coached to provide standard operational air traffic control radio responses. But nothing about Afghanistan is “average.” Pilots are often instructed to change course or hold over some area because of rebel activity in that particular area. Alternatively, the local circuit might be busy, often extremely so.

Consequently there is sometimes much confusion between foreign pilots and those officials on the ground responsible for air traffic controls. There have been occasions – many of them – when there has been almost total chaos, with more near misses, particularly with helicopter traffic, than anybody would like to admit to.

Fortunately helicopters are not high-speed craft. So the pilots involved most times have ample warning and are able to break out of harms way.

There is also the problem, when we fly around built up areas such as Kabul, of heavy frequency jamming initiated by NATO Forces to prevent Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) being detonated by mobile phones or radio signals. It is a harsh fairly high-pitched ear-shattering ruckus, something like the din from a heavy metal rock band’s microphone feedback.

Sometimes the jamming can get so intense that we are unable to hear the instructions from the tower, which, under any conditions, can quickly become a serious flying hazard. The jamming is particularly bad around the airport and the diplomatic areas.

There were many times that we were unable to follow tower instructions. Even worse, we couldn’t visually acquire them, and had we been on a collision course in poor visibility, we probably wouldn’t have been able to take evasive action in time.

I remember returning from Bagram Air Base after a sortie in weather that can best be described as marginal. We’d been enveloped in heavy rain and slight mist: something like 200 feet AGL and very poor forward visibility. Vectored to the approach for the runway by the tower – who were also keeping separation from other helicopters arriving at the airport more or less

at the same ETA – there were some tense moments because we were aware that there was a formation of two other helicopters positioning the same approach.

The most stressful moments I experienced flying in the Afghanistan airspace involved returning to Kabul in conditions of that same poor visibility I spotted the first time I arrived in Afghan air space.

Also, the weather in Afghanistan can be extremely demanding and often changes very rapidly and without warning, especially during winter. Every year there are aircraft lost in bad weather, many of them crashing in the mountains.

One technique our pilots soon assimilated when flying in potentially bad weather was to continually and visually check the route behind us, and for good reason. Weather fronts often close in, in almost no time at all, cutting off what is occasionally the only route back to safety. There is also airframe icing, a constant problem during the cold months. We would make a point of avoiding snow and rainstorms or any evident precipitation, particularly if the temperature falls below 5 deg. Centigrade.

Bad weather pilot stories in Afghanistan are legion. A couple of years ago, one of the more experienced Bell-412 pilots was heading back to Kabul in relatively marginal weather conditions when he observed a snowstorm ahead, which within minutes had completely enveloped his aircraft.

The man had to make an immediate precautionary landing as he was in total IMC conditions and was about to lose visual contact with the ground. Left with no options whatever, he was forced to land in a walled compound belonging to one of the local farmers, who fortunately for the crew was not a Taliban sympathizer. The local family took them into their house and looked after them until a security force was able to reach their position, secure the helicopter and take them back to Kabul. The helicopter was recovered untouched a couple of days later after the weather had sufficiently cleared.

We also avoid flying in IMC conditions because we are not issued with oxygen breathing equipment.

To be able to safely fly in cloud or in poor weather to carry out instrument letdowns at Kabul, we need to get to at least 18,000 feet to avoid crashing into the mountains that surround the country’s main airfield. According to

Civil Air Regulations, we are not allowed to fly higher than 12,000 feet without oxygen, so our operations are strictly day VFR flying. Helicopters are allowed to fly at night in Afghanistan only if they are equipped with night vision equipment or, more colloquially, NVGs, and the pilots are trained to use them.

And then comes summer, when temperatures can rise to 40 deg. plus. Again, these conditions require a totally new set of parameters and pilots have to be careful how they load and fly their aircraft.

High temperature makes the air less dense at higher altitudes, and careful planning has to be carried out before each flight, as well as for take-off out of some of the confined LZs in which we are required to land. Some helicopters have crashed after take-off because there was not sufficient power available in hot and high conditions.



As Neall Ellis likes to comment, some of the Afghan vistas are spectacular – “Always something

new…” (Photo: Neall Ellis)

The same situation holds for Kabul, where, at the best of times, visibility is barely acceptable.

The haze that results from smoke from tens of thousands of wood fires lit by the local inhabitants to cook their food – together with the dust – is sometimes so bad many mornings that the airfield is declared IMC. Moreover, navigating your way out of there to reporting points can be a nightmare experience. The worst is often left for last, on the return leg, as Russian pilots seldom seem to find themselves over the point where they report themselves to be, and this is a serious hazard facing all aviators operating in the region.

Dust storms in the drier season are intermittent and often appear without warning. We would return to Kabul to find the airport and the town completely obscured. We would be forced fly the approach paths from the compulsory reporting area that surrounds the airfield at 100 feet AGL with forward visibility of less than 200 yards.

Add to all that the numerous radio and telephone masts and towers in and around Kabul, and it means that bringing in an aircraft into land needs a constant awareness of the pilot’s position over the ground in order to avoid flying into one of these obstacles.



"There are few countries in the world with such inspiring vistas as Afghanistan – it was what is waiting to greet you on the ground that tends to intimidate…": Neall Ellis

Then follows the ultimate delight: the occasional Afghan citizen who simply has to test his AK-47 the moment a helicopter flies over his mud dwelling. Fortunately the visibility is so bad under these conditions that the shooter usually has no time to take aim. The only solution is to keep the speed of the aircraft as high as possible and disappear into the gloom.

The reality is that the insurgents are as trigger-happy a bunch as any group of troublemakers in the Third World. They will use every opportunity to shoot down overflying helicopters. Nor does it help that many of the USAID military bases are situated in some of the most inaccessible parts of Central Asia.

Although there are roads linking these outlying bases to main roads, they are normally unsurfaced. Most have been primed by the Taliban with mines, or in the jargon, Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). That makes road travel dangerous and the personnel based in these camps obviously prefer to travel by air because there is also the threat of ambush. Flying is invariably the preferred mode of travel, and where there is no suitable runway for a fixed wing to land, helicopters are extensively used.

When we were tasked to fly to Qalat in the Zabol Province to the south of Kabul, we would offload our passengers at the Provincial Reconstruction Team Base and then fly to Lagman Forward Operating Base to refuel, perhaps a mile or two distant by road. The reasoning given by both military and civilian personnel at the two bases was that it was too dangerous for the passengers to have to travel by road from the FOB to the PRT, even if the two were less than a rifle shot from each other.

Conversely, I argued often enough while in the country, that if NATO forces were actually serious about dominating the areas around their bases, pro-government personnel and troops should effectively be able to walk the short distance without too much fear of attack or kidnapping.

But then, as a South African with considerable experience in our bush wars in Angola, South West Africa and Zambia in the 1970s and 1980s, it was often not easy to comprehend the background to the politics behind some of the decision-making that took place, usually behind closed doors. Which begged the question: why has the situation been allowed to deteriorate to this parlous state? Like the Soviets before them, these people are fighting a

counter-insurgency campaign that has escalated steadily in the past few years. Yet Coalition Forces on the ground in Afghanistan remain isolated behind their fortifications for the duration, instead of venturing out in a bid to dominate the countryside.

Effectively, the powers-that-be have allowed the Taliban to take control. More to the point, the average Afghan knows it…

It is no longer a secret that the Taliban are in the process of not only dominating, but also consolidating their hold over just about the whole of the country, particularly in the rural areas. In some areas the Taliban command structure even dictates to NATO forces and government officials exactly when the local commercial mobile telephone transmission towers can be switched on or off.

I am not the only outsider who found it amazing that the guerrillas found themselves in a position to dictate what happens in an area that was pretty well populated by NATO troops. But then again, some of the more obscure European partners in NATO forces deployed to Afghanistan are notoriously loathe to commit themselves to any kind of offensive action, never mind fight an effective war.

During the normal course of operations in Afghanistan, we flew with three separate GPS tracking devices fitted to our machine. All were for emergency purposes.

The first was a Blue Force Tracker that was issued by the US State Department. When its emergency buttons are activated, it is supposed to offer some kind of result within 15 minutes and this can be anything from a close air support fixed-wing strike aircraft to a heli-borne ground support group.

Then comes the Fast Wave Tracker, monitored by our company operations room, together with a third alarm system known as the SpiderTrack System and monitored by company operations personnel in South Africa.

Essentially, the idea was that if we were fired upon during flight – or obliged to make a forced landing in hostile terrain due to enemy ground fire – or even suffered an in-flight emergency such as an engine failure or had one of the critical helicopter systems going on the blink, we would activate our distress signal and, in theory, assistance should be forthcoming almost immediately.

However, there was never a guarantee that the cavalry would respond. We were operating civilian aircraft, regarded by some military types as distinctly low priority, even if we were responsible for supplying outlying bases with most of their essential needs.

On one flight from FOB Kalagush in the Nuristan Province to Asadabad to the East, for instance, we had the mechanical problem onboard the Mi-8 that I mentioned earlier. After the faulty engine had been shut down, we initiated our Blue Force Tracker system and broadcast a series of Maydays. This was essential since we were flying over territory that was acknowledged as hostile. Obviously, had the remaining engine also given up the ghost, we would have preferred to have an armed escort to provide us with adequate top cover.

It was sobering that only two days earlier we had witnessed a very substantial military operation against insurgent positions in the exact same valley along which were we were then flying, not at all sure of the situation on the ground.

There was no immediate reaction to our Mayday calls. Instead of the cavalry arriving to provide is with an escort, we received a telephone call over the mobile network asking if we were okay. The operator queried whether we had perhaps pushed wrong the buttons by mistake!

In the end, everything turned out well and we were able to reach Asadabad where a successful single-engine approach was made and the helicopter landed without any damage.

On our USAID-contracted Mi-8 helicopters, we customarily had four armed “shooters” onboard. The job of these professionals was to provide protection should we have ended up on the ground in a precautionary or forced landing.

As pilots for an American government agency, we were not allowed to carry weapons, but with those armed “passengers” in the back, we were confident that we had adequate protection.

Our “shooters” were mostly expatriate military-trained personnel and most had some form of Special Forces background. Generally they were an efficient and capable bunch, just the type to have around if a serious situation arose, not only on the ground but also in the various bars scattered around Kabul we liked to visit.

As part of a program of Team Continuation Training, we regularly

conducted the kind of drills we would have followed should we have had to make an emergency landing. The “shooters” also arranged firearms training for the air crews at some of the bases we flew to and gave lectures on various types of weapons we might encounter in order that we could stay current with our weapons handling abilities.

Throughout, it was stressed that that we knew exactly what to do in an emergency situation and what was expected of us. As one of them succinctly put it, “when the shit starts to fly, that’s not the time to learn a new bunch of drills.”

Then, having got back to base after a good day’s flying, we’d often decide to have a night on the town and our “shooters” would be part of the team. After a couple of beers in some of the downtown bars where males normally outnumbered ten-to-one, competition sometimes became fierce and they were a useful adjunct to our numbers.

In moving about vast swathes of Afghanistan we must have visited scores of different bases over time and generally got a very good reception from the military personnel at them. Lower ranking military personnel were always helpful and often went out of their way to assist with minor problems, or with refueling.

In contrast, some the officers we encountered in our daily meanderings among the mountains were nothing short of arrogant. Many seemed to believe that because we were not military, we could be treated with disdain. There were those who even resented our presence on their little stretch of turf, even though they couldn’t have managed without the cargo we unloaded from our Mi-8s and that our role in Afghanistan was to assist them in their war effort.

Towards the end of 2009, a particularly strong frontal weather moved over the country and flying conditions suddenly became drastic. A Russian-crewed helicopter landed at an American base late in the afternoon, and the Russian flight captain made it clear to the base commander that not only was he not happy about flying any further that day, but that it would be precarious to take off again so close to nightfall. He’d already been warned by radio that the weather between the base and his final destination, Kabul, was worsening.

The base commander, a colonel, was quite blunt about refusing the Russian’s request to overnight at his base. In fact, he instructed the helicopter

crew to depart as soon as they had offloaded their cargo. Obviously intimidated, the pilot and his crew lifted off for Kabul, flew straight into a snowstorm and were all killed when their “blinded” helicopter crashed into a mountain.

Because the weather stayed bad for several few days, the crashed helicopter in its distinctive white livery was only discovered on a snow-covered peak after a search and rescue effort that lasted almost a week. One can only speculate whether the colonel who was directly responsible for those deaths was ever brought to book because he refused to let a helicopter crew sleep over. Being American, he might even have been rewarded and promoted to brigadier-general. What it needs is for this man to be exposed for the bigot that he is. With his actions, he should not today be wearing the proud uniform of the United States Army.



Some of the helipads in remote regions were often badly exposed to attacks by Taliban irregulars. “Still, it was a job, and we simply had to get on with it,” commented Nellis who took this picture. (Photo: Neall Ellis)

There is another problem that appears to be unique to Afghanistan. The kite flying season there sometimes presents aviators with what could be construed as a few potential dangers, especially to the uninitiated. Kite flying is a

national sport, and has been for a long time.

Pilots operating around some of the larger towns continually have to take evasive action to avoid kites because the cords used might easily entangle with the controls. Often, while carrying out our usual after-flight inspections, we'd sometimes discover what is best described as "bird's nests" formed from the kites tangled in the rotor controls.

Fortunately the Mi-8 Hip is a powerful helicopter and this twine does not seem to have an effect on the moving controls. At the same time, we're uncertain if the kite-flying ploy is a deliberate effort by the Taliban to push these obstacles into our flight paths in the hope of doing damage, but what does quickly become apparent is that there are usually many more kites in the air on the approach and take-off routes at Kabul Airport than anywhere else in the country.

During one flight into the Kandahar PRT a bunch of locals launched kites directly into the flight path during our final approach, which caused us to take hasty evasive action. There is obviously something devious going on and frankly, it could eventually result in serious problems.

It would be a simple matter to ban kite flying anywhere within a mile or so of all airports in the country. But when the country's civilian administration – and by inference, the military engaged there – is emasculated by an ineffective command structure and enough rules and regulations that have the potential to create mayhem, the problems start to escalate.

We obviously experienced some lighter moments during the course of our duties, such as when we land at a NATO base and the troops approach us thinking that we are Russians. Curiously, they invariably took it for granted that we didn't understand English.

Usually they would start trying to make a connection by using a variation of some kind of puerile Pidgin English. Occasionally we'd play along and the results were often amusing and it was astonishing how hypocritical Westerners sometimes could be.

In our faces they'd talk quite openly about these "dumb fucking Russian pilots who know fuck all." Then once the guys see that we can actually converse more or less in the same kind of English that they use, they might see the funny side. But had we been English-speaking Muscovites, a lot of

damage might have resulted and probably had been in the past.

There are a number of civilian operators on flying contracts in Afghanistan. There is Presidential, a subsidiary of Zee (ex-Blackwater) flying Puma S330s; the Department of State (DOS) Air Wing that uses Huey-2 helicopters; Evergreen with their S-61s and Puma helicopters; and Molsom, a subsidiary of CHC flying Bell 212s.

We often worked with the DOS Air Wing and their Huey-2 helicopters that would escort our helicopters while we would transport important dignitaries into the interior. These ageing battle-craft were customarily armed with 7.62 mm machine guns, though some were fitted with M134 six-barreled Gatlings. These remarkable automatic weapons are not only capable of laying down a tremendous amount of firepower, but their pilots are among the most professional in the business and, as I was discover, a pretty good bunch to mix with. All were former military, which means that the majority perfectly understand the demands of Afghanistan's formidable environment.

The DOS Air Wing falls under INL, which is basically DynCorp. In addition, DynCorp flew the same helicopters that we did, the Mi-8 MTV, all part of a huge, ongoing drug eradication program.

Various Eastern Bloc countries also have contributions to make, through companies such as Panj, Burundaiavia and others, again with Mi-8s.

Some local companies such as Kam Air and Kabul Air lease Hip helicopters on contract, such as to supply Supreme, a logistics company that ships out food supplies to various military bases. Then there's Vertical Aviation, a South American Colombian company on contract to the US Army Engineers Corps. Abu Dhabi Aviation was leasing two Bell 412 helicopters to USAID while I was there.

Top of the pile in a shadowy mode is an extremely secretive unit that we only know as Pegasus. More paramilitary than civilian, they operated a number of Mi-171 and Mi-172 helicopters, a more advanced version of the Mi-8 MTV, and flew mostly night operations. Information sources suggested that Pegasus was tasked to support some of the "Super Spy" units operating in remote areas along the ragged frontier with Pakistan, and, who knows, perhaps beyond that as well.

Apart from Russian crews, most of the helicopter pilots flying in Afghanistan are ex-military. In fact, some of the companies like the DOS Air Wing stipulate that military training with a NVG qualification is a *sine qua*

non.

It is difficult to estimate how many helicopters are operating in Afghanistan. If all military units are taken into account – and you add in civilian-registered planes – the numbers must easily be in excess of 500 airframes. Which raises another issue: just keeping all these machines operational is obviously a monumental task.



Like Bagram and Kabul airfields, Kandahar presented its own set of imponderables. For a start, it was far too big to be managed with any measure of good security: the Taliban was always somewhere in the background…and still is," said Ellis, who also took the photo.

The logistics to provide fuel and ammunition requirements to the many and varied operators is formidable, especially since almost all of it is brought into the country by road. Some civilian helicopters fly up to 90 hours per month, and once you do your sums, it becomes clear that getting enough fuel into the country to supply these thirsty machines must be a nightmare, particularly since many of the fuel tankers come from Pakistan and convoys are routinely attacked and often destroyed en route by Taliban factions, not

only within Afghanistan's borders, but in Pakistan itself.

The majority of these tankers are privately owned, and the owners clearly suffer significant losses from the guerrillas who like to target every resupply route within reach.

The war in Afghanistan, essentially, is counter-insurgency-orientated. Yet NATO units tend to move around in platoon-size force when conducting OP (observation post) operations.

From what I have observed in conflicts elsewhere on the globe – in the Middle East and in Africa in particular – the best way to fight such hostilities is to deploy small teams, backed by a series of quick reaction mobile heliborne units at bases around the country. These should be on standby to go in at a moment's notice. They will obviously be supplemented by armored vehicles and by artillery and jet strike aircraft.

The secret, basically, is to get your people active on the ground: to counter an effective guerrilla struggle, you take the fight to the insurgents. In any unconventional confrontation, as was graphically demonstrated in Malaya, Kenya and more recently elsewhere in Africa, you need to hit your adversary when he least expects it.

The hugely successful "Fire Force" concept that emerged during the course of several conflicts in Southern Africa is totally alien to just about all field commanders active in Afghanistan. Yet in Angola, Zambia, Mozambique and Rhodesia, it used aggression and flexibility to good advantage and "delivered the goods" when required to do so.

Afghanistan is a perfect environment for the deployment of small-unit, reconnaissance team observation posts in the mountains. These would be comprised of usually four soldiers at a time. Rhodesia's Selous Scouts very often sent two-man teams hundreds of miles behind enemy lines and they rarely enjoyed the luxury of a hot extraction by helicopter if serious problems developed, which sometimes happened.

In Afghanistan, small unit reconnaissance elements would be strategically situated to overlook villages and infiltration routes from Pakistan. Thus, when groups of insurgents are observed, a similar type of "Fire Force" would be called in to do the necessary.

OP troops sitting in isolated high spots might be deployed for days, sometimes even weeks, moving around at night to different positions. They

would lie up and observe areas known to host hostile elements that like to terrorize local civilians. And should the Taliban menace these troops, it would be a simple matter either to talk an air strike into neutralizing the threat or airlift the group from the site with the use of choppers.

I am aware that some British and American Special Forces groups actually do some work like this, but these efforts are too small and too fragmented to make any lasting impact, which is surprising since NATO has total air superiority.

Putting down a bunch of well-trained troops in carefully selected ops will almost certainly minimize civilian casualties: it will also help to win over the hearts and minds of the local population. Because of the rough terrain, these troops would not be that easily detected. Additionally, NATO forces operational in Central Asia are equipped with the most advanced equipment for fighting both day and night operations, but that is not the long-term answer to soldiering on in Afghanistan.

Looking at the broader picture of what is happening in Afghanistan today, there is clearly a fundamental need to go back to basics in order to contain the kind of counter insurgency that has been launched by the Taliban. In this regard, it does little to have a sophisticated gun platform like the Apache helicopter firing at a predetermined insurgent target from a mile or two away.

More compact choppers, like the Aerospatiale Squirrel – or even a modified Kiowa armed with a side-firing 20 mm cannon in orbit over the troops – provide much more effective support. These smaller helicopters would not only sweep the target area but also provide stopper groups to prevent enemy escape. During our wars in Southern Africa, the French-built Alouette III gunship was a major force multiplier, not only because of its firepower but because these machines were both versatile and could perform a multitude of roles.

The reason for using a 20 mm side firing cannon using HE rounds, instead of the 7.62 mm Gatling is because of the fearful noise the rounds make when exploding after contacting the ground. We had a saying in the South African Air Force: “The side that makes the most noise wins the battle…!”

There was no question that the French-built Alouette gunship was feared by the majority of insurgents in Southern Africa’s “Border Wars” while they lasted.

For the enemy holed up in Afghanistan’s mountains – always difficult to

attack effectively – strike aircraft might initially be used for shock. But then it is vital that troops follow up and sweep the area to eliminate or capture those who have survived. In the process they will also collect weapons, communication equipment and the kind of documents that would provide valuable intelligence.

Once, when tasked to fly a small group of USAID personnel to a military base in the interior – it was manned by a US Special Forces group – I discussed the "Fire Force" operational concept with one of the senior operators. He was obviously curious, especially since I had years of hands-on experience[3], but he ended it by telling me that while the concept sounded OK, it was just not feasible.

It would be too difficult to deploy an OP on the top of a mountain, he reasoned. He added that because river gullies in Afghanistan were too deep and too narrow for helicopters to land in, it would also be dangerous. The man was an experienced and knowledgeable soldier, yet he had no idea of how a "Fire Force" operates or its basic objective.

From his approach, sadly, I accepted that further discussion had become pointless. The concept is simply not considered as part of the overall strategy to combat the insurgents in American and most European military training establishments. At the same time, he affirmed my belief that the US military was too rigid in their approach to fighting wars. They were also dogmatic, and almost like the Soviets in Afghanistan a quarter century before, lateral thinking by the man on the ground was often not permitted.

There is another vital component. The commander on the ground must have full control of his troops at all times.

Which raises the most basic issue of all in this ongoing conflict: Where in the history of warfare does the man on the ground who has the enemy clearly in his cross-hairs, still have to request permission to fire?

And the way things are run today out of Kabul, he would probably do so from an officer who sits in an operations room perhaps 100 miles away?

Crazy!

1 Lester W. Grau: *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*: Frank Cass Publishers, London, 1998

2 "Taliban Missile Downed Helicopter": *Daily Telegraph*, London, July 27, 2010, p. 5

3 Al J. Venter (with Neall Ellis and Richard Wood) *The Chopper Boys*; Greenhill Books, London, Stackpole Books, US, 1994: also see Neall Ellis's helicopter gunship operations in Sierra Leone and

the Balkan War, Chapters 1-8: Al J. Venter: *War Dog*, Casemate Publishing, US and UK, 2006